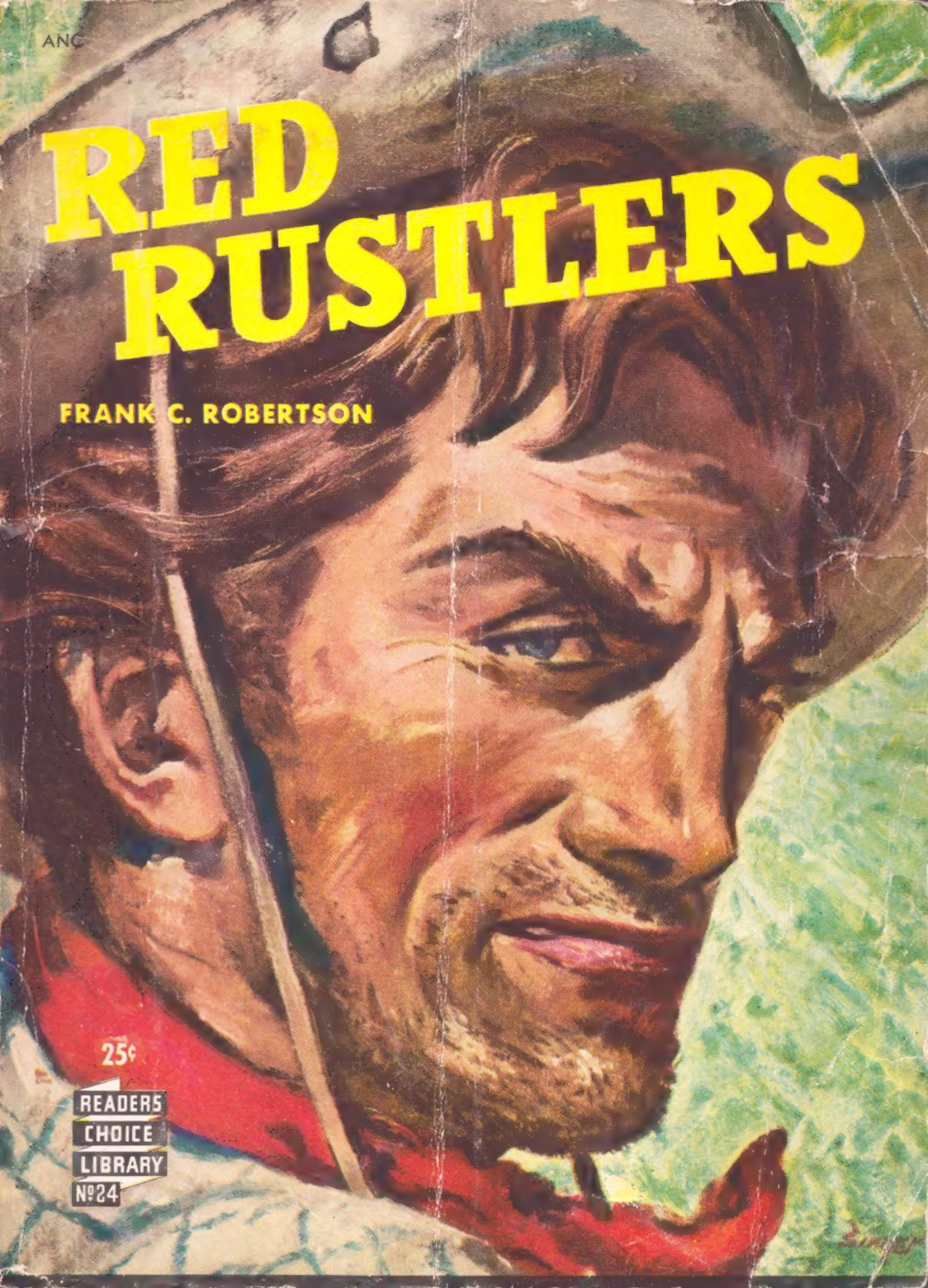
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RED RUSTLERS

By Frank C. Robertson

Complete and Unabridged

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CHAPTER ONE

A Killer in Town

THE two strangers strolled out of the saloon with freshly lighted cigarettes in their mouths and good-humouredly surveyed the crowd of loafers basking in the spring sun that beat against the south side of the saloon. Somebody was being gleefully baited, but they were taken aback when a skinny person with a long pump-handle beard and a marshal's badge on his lapel left the crowd and advanced upon them with ire in his eye.

"You from the Rockin' M?" the officer demanded shrilly.

The two cowboys denied all knowledge of any such outfit.

"Well, watch yore step around here," the limb of the law warned them. "I'm the marshal here an' I intend tuh keep the peace. The first fool cowhands who try bustin' loose in Bonneville will find themselves in jail."

The strangers disclaimed all intentions of "busting loose."

"That's the way I aim tuh talk tuh them Rockin' M hoodlums too when they start hellin' around in here." The marshal glared at the loafers in the sun and walked importantly up the street. The strangers realised that it was the marshal the crowd had been baiting.

"This shore must be a plumb law-abidin' town with a marshal like that," one of the strangers remarked.

"Wait till the Rockin' M bunch drifts into town," a loafer remarked cynically. "Skinner talks big all winter when they're a hundred miles from here, but come spring his big talk'll melt away like the snows."

"An' yuh can't blame him at that," another said. "He wouldn't last five minutes if he got in the road o' the Rockin' M gang."

"Just the same," a well-dressed man spoke up distinctly, "somebody will have to get in the road of that outfit some time. No country can afford to tolerate the lawless activities of such ruffians forever. In my opinion they're just common outlaws, and some day they'll have to be destroyed. Skinner ain't the man to do it, but somebody else will have to."

"And I reckon you're fixing to be that noble purifier, Mr. Fox, no?" a chilly, purring voice demanded.

The men beside the saloon were cured of their spring lethargy as though by a miracle. They sprang to their feet and scattered like quail to get out of the way. The two strangers alone failed to move with alacrity. The storekeeper, Hubert Fox, seemed petrified. He hadn't seen the hawk-faced, cat-

footed cowboy who had come up between two buildings at the rear and had been silently listening to the conversation. The townsmen all knew him — the "Mormon Kid," deadliest of all the killers of the Rocking M. Not a man would have given five cents for the life of the merchant who had spoken his mind without the precaution of looking around.

The Mormon Kid showed white, even teeth in a cruel grin. He was leaning against the corner of the saloon with his left hand plainly against the wall, while he stroked his neatly combed moustache with the other.

"I am waiting for you to speak, Mr. Fox," the killer purred. "You don't like the Rocking M, no?"

The merchant stood his ground, though his face had turned a ghastly green. "No, Mormon, I don't like the Rocking M," he declared.

The Mormon Kid bit his finger-nails delicately. "It is too bad, Mr. Fox, much too bad — for you," he said. His sentence ended like the crack of a whip. "I am of the Rocking M. I permit no man to run it down in my presence. Down on your knees, you cur, and apologise."

Fox looked around helplessly. He was unarmed, but that was his good luck. And he had a family depending upon him. He knew he would be shamed forever before his fellow townsmen, but that was better than being killed. With two exceptions the men in the crowd were as frightened as he was. Those two were the strange riders who had drifted into town a couple of hours before — from where nobody knew.

Now one of those riders, a good-looking fellow of about twenty-five, took a swift step forward. The cat-like eyes of the killer had seemed to be fixed upon Fox, but the instant Bob Law took that step forward the Mormon Kid's right hand flashed to his hip, and the puncher who had moved was covered by a gun.

But as Bob Law stepped ahead his companion had grasped him by the arm. "Easy, Bob," Sam Crane warned. "This looks like a delicate situation, kinda."

"You think you'd like to interfere in this, my friend?" the killer queried.

"Hombre, you seem tuh be master o' ceremonies here," Sam Crane drawled, pulling his partner back.

There was a smile on his face, and for an instant his grey eyes clashed with the sombre black ones of the Mormon Kid. He had seemingly backed down with his tongue, but his eyes had flashed a challenge to the killer which couldn't be mistaken. The Mormon Kid attempted to stare him down with a baleful glare, but the steady eyes refused to waver.

The Mormon Kid was really puzzled. Jumping on people as he had on the man Fox was his usual method of inspiring terror. Apparently it had worked this time, but he could see no terror in the eyes of the taller of the two punchers — only a cool, withering contempt. He couldn't understand it.

His gun was out, and he knew that he could get both of the punchers before they could draw, and yet they weren't afraid of him. And he had been forced to drop his eyes.

Then with redoubled venom the killer turned upon Fox.

"You're still standing there," he gritted. "Down on your belly right there and then crawl here and kiss my boots. Down!"

With a moan such as only a man shamed in the eyes of his neighbours can give, Fox dropped to his knees. The killer was implacable.

Slowly, then, like a dog cringing to the lash the merchant crawled forward and touched the pointed toes of the Mormon Kid's beautiful boots.

With a short laugh the Mormon Kid dropped his gun back into the holster and kicked the merchant contemptuously in the ribs. "The next time you mention the Rocking M, do it with respect," he warned.

It was not the first outrage of the kind that had been perpetrated by the dominant cow outfit of the Bonneville range. Pete Dargo, the foreman of the outfit, had between thirty and forty men under his command, and they were all gunmen. They could shoot the town to pieces any time they wished.

The Mormon Kid gave a final disdainful look at his victim and started for the saloon.

"One minute, hombre," Sam Crane drawled.

With a start the Mormon Kid turned, and his hand dropped to his gun. Just before it got there he jerked it away with an ejaculation of pain and flipped blood into the faces of the spectators. Sam Crane's gun had roared, and the bullet had gone between the two of the Mormon Kid's fingers, drawing blood from each of them. When Crane had drawn nobody knew.

The Mormon Kid glared at his hand with amazement and darted a furtive glance at the man who had shot him. He found Crane's gun now covering him exactly as his own had covered Bob Law a minute before. Likewise Bob Law had his hand upon his gun and was watching out for other interference.

"You'll pay for this, hombre," the Mormon Kid gritted.

"Mebbe," Sam drawled. "But right now I'm likin' your li'l entertainment so well that I just hanker tuh see it repeated. So down on yore knees, yuh lousy li'l varmint, an' return that there caress."

"I'll die first," the killer snarled.

"No, no," Sam smiled. "You won't die. I'll just naturally stick yore head down there if yuh don't do it willin'ly, an' I'll shoot a finger off every time yuh reach for one o' them guns."

"I'd like an even break with you," the Mormon Kid hissed, his voice breaking in a sob of anger with every word.

"But yuh won't git it, hombre — not this afternoon. Yuh may be a plumb rattlesnake, but yuh done got yore fangs pulled to-day."

Fox, the merchant, suddenly found his voice.

"What you suggest, stranger, ain't necessary," he told Sam. "I'm willin' to let it go. Let's not have any more trouble."

"All right," Sam agreed promptly. "If yo're satisfied with his apology I am. Go on, hombre — yore case is dismissed."

He dropped his gun back in the holster negligently, but his partner, Bob Law, maintained a grasp on his and kept an eagle eye on the killer's hands. The Mormon Kid's hand flexed and fluttered but didn't quite approach the handle of his gun. At the saloon door, however, he turned and faced his still trembling audience.

"I remember every face there is here," he hissed. "Don't never let me hear of anybody talking about this affair to anybody. Do you understand?"

There was no reply, and he vanished inside the saloon, where he had a drink of whisky. Then he went to have his hand tied up.

But Sam and Bob suddenly found themselves isolated like they had the plague. The Bonneville citizens were convinced that it was as much as any man's life was worth to be friendly with them.

Hubert Fox, the man they had avenged, was the only one who didn't hurry away.

"Boys," he said soberly, "I'm sorry you butted in. It'll only get you killed if you stay in the country, an' the same thing'll likely happen to me. It'd been better to let him get away with it. He's a cold-blooded murderer, and his gang will back him up."

"But you was sayin', Mr. Fox, that somebody would have tuh curb that Rockin' M outfit," Sam remarked. "Why wait for the other fellow?"

A slight gleam came into the merchant's discouraged eye.

"You mean that you — intend to — to fight the Rocking M?" Fox gasped.

"No, he don't, Mr. Fox," Bob Law spoke up. "We're leavin' this here village as soon as our broncs rest up a little."

"That is if we can find a job," Sam smiled. "If not we'll stick here till we do find one."

Bob Law groaned.

"Boys, if you stay here now you'll be marked men," Fox warned. "I doubt if any cattle outfit would dare give you a job now. Lots of 'em hate Dargo an' his outfit, but they fear 'em a lot more'n they hate 'em."

"That's a tough prospect all right," Sam admitted, "but if we can't git a job I reckon we'll ride the grub line. I like this country. Judgin' from the range I've seen it orta be the finest cow country outdoors."

"It is," Fox sighed. "If it wasn't for the bullying of that outfit it would be fine. But one trouble is that even a lot of business men here are back of them. They do spend lots of money."

"I see. What do the cow outfits think of 'em?"

Fox looked around furtively and dropped his voice before he would commit himself.

"The Rocking M owns around twenty-five or thirty thousand head of cattle. They're spread all over the range. They've only been here three years, but there isn't an outfit in the country that brands as big a per cent of calves as it did."

Sam Crane smiled grimly.

"An' yet they're afraid tuh hire a puncher that that gang don't like."

Suddenly Fox looked at the two riders contemplatively.

"There is one outfit where yuh might git on — if yuh go right tuh headquarters," he said. "But it'd be dangerous for you, and it might be for them."

"Who is it?" Sam demanded.

"It's Tom Mercer's spread. Somebody laid for Tom over a year ago an' put a bullet in his spine. He ain't walked since. Some think he's losin' his mind or he'd git rid o' that Mexican foreman of his, Fernando Velez."

Sam Crane gave a violent start.

"A Mexican foreman — up here? That's queer," he said, almost as if he were speaking to himself.

"You'd never know Velez was Mexican by either his talk or his looks. Fine looking fellow, good cattleman — and until lately I reckon he was about the most popular man on the range."

"And now?" Sam queried.

"Now he's darn thick with the Rocking M. Furthermore, they're sayin' that Bee Mercer has refused tuh marry him. You know how Mexicans can be," Fox said darkly.

"I know," Sam nodded. "Thanks for the information."

The merchant was glad enough to get away from them, and the two men strolled out to the livery stable to look at their horses.

The two punchers had reached the shelter of the stall which their mounts shared together before either man spoke.

"Sam," Bob said slowly, "do you think it could be the same man?"

"Funny if it was," Sam murmured. "Me huntin' that Mex till I conclude he's either dead or too far across the border tuh reach, an' then run across him by accident away up here."

"But the only evidence you have that this is the man who murdered yore brother is that he packs the same name," Bob pointed out.

"Just the same, Bob, I've always had a hunch that some day I was gonna find the man who murdered Marve an' sink a bullet into his carcass. I dare tuh say that there ain't ten Mexican punchers in this whole state. Quite a coincidence, ain't it, that the first one we hear of is named Velez?" Sam demanded.

"I agree with yuh," Bob said. "I hope it's yore man, because I know you'll never settle down till yuh find him. But just what do you know about the fellow?"

"Very little. I've never seen him. The only description I have of him is vague. But I know this about him: He's no common vaquero. They tell me that he's an educated, high-class Mexican gone wrong. But if I ever see the man I'll camp on his trail until I know positively whether or not he's the hombre who shot my brother in the back," Sam declared grimly.

"An' I'll be trailin' with yuh," Bob Law said in the same grim tone.

CHAPTER TWO

Thrust and Parry

For many years Sam Crane and Bob Law had been pardners. Both were range-bred, tough of fibre and courageous in spirit. They were about the same age, and the fact that Sam was a natural leader of men and Bob a steel-tried lieutenant made them a forceful team.

One might live with these two men for months without ever suspecting that their paths of life hadn't always been the same. Yet one of them was independently wealthy, and the other had worked for wages all his life. One had received an education; the other was hard put to read a newspaper. Yet during the years of their association Sam Crane had never enjoyed any luxury that he hadn't shared with his friend. Despite the fact that he could use good English Sam invariably used the same range lingo which was the only kind of language Bob Law could master.

For a long time after their clash with the Mormon Kid the two friends sat upon the manger in front of their horses and talked. Bob Law was urging caution.

"Even if you're plumb convinced that Velez is your man yuh don't wanta go off half cocked. Yuh might be gittin' the wrong *señor*."

"If I'm ninety-nine per cent sure he's my man I'll keep still till I'm dead certain," Sam promised.

"That's fine," Bob sighed. "But neither do yuh wanta concentrate too hard on him an' forgit the ruckus we got into to-day. That Mormon Kid person ain't plumb convinced yuh shaded him on the draw."

"I didn't," Sam laughed. "Yuh noticed I wasn't makin' no threatenin' gestures whatever while he had his cannon trained on you. But I shore got my old rattler outa the hoot while he was admirin' the shine Fox was givin' his shoes."

"A man who'd make another do that orta be shot."

"Close harmony with yuh there, but the man who beats the Mormon Kid has gotta shoot fast an' straight."

"What about this Velez we're lookin' fer?"

"I'm lookin' for," Sam corrected.

"We're lookin' fer," Bob maintained doggedly.

"The we's have it," Sam grinned. "Bobby, old man, I never would have wasted around three thousand ca-tridge shells every year if I hadn't figgered he might be fast."

"Well, here's hopin' yuh meet him, an' hopin' harder yuh see him first. But what about to-night? I heard tell some more o' them rarin', tearin' man-eaters o' the Rockin' M was expected in this evenin'. If we're here they may move in on us."

"Let's eat an' kinder meander back towards the saloon," Sam suggested.

It was supper time and the restaurant was full of people. The counter was crowded, and there was somebody at every table. Suddenly the two punchers saw a table with only two men at it.

"Come on," Sam grunted.

"Hey," Bob protested, "one o' them's that Mormon Kid!"

"So I noticed."

With a shrug Bob followed his companion. They were almost at the table before the Mormon Kid looked up. His dark face flushed, but he made no sign of recognition. As they stopped beside the table the other man looked up. He was taller and heavier than the killer, and at least ten years older. His features, though tanned deeply, were smooth and pleasant. He stood up graciously.

"Ah, gentlemen, you are looking for a table? We have room."

"Thanks." Sam dropped into the chair beside the Mormon Kid and facing the other man. With an intuitive flash Sam knew that the other man was a Mexican. Bob seated himself by the stranger. The waitress hurried up and took their order, and hurried away twice as fast. The courteous Mexican seemed puzzled by the crowd's attention. Sam smiled grimly. He knew that despite the killer's warning the news of the affair of a few minutes before had spread, and the people in the restaurant were all set for sudden death for somebody.

"Peculiar," the older man mused smilingly. "These people have no manners. You are strangers; therefore they stare."

"Yeah, 'tis funny," Sam admitted. "*Señor*, bein' as we are strangers in a strange land mebbe you could tell us where we might find a job."

" 'Señor' — that has a funny sound up here. It is not much used here. In fact I much prefer to be called plain 'mister' or without any appendages at all. My name — it is Velez — Fernando Velez."

The tension was so terrific to Bob Law that he thought his nerves would snap like over-taut wires. Yet seemingly he alone was under a strain. He noticed that Velez was looking not at Sam Crane, when he spoke the name, but at the Mormon Kid. The latter's expression hadn't altered except that there was a cynical smile upon his lips. Sam Crane was smiling affably.

"Glad tuh meet you, sen — Fernando Velez — plumb *glad* tuh meet yuh," he said heartily. "Crane is the name, Sam Crane, from down New Mexico way."

He paused briefly, and watchful Bob Law saw a furtive glance pass between the other men with the speed of a shaft of light.

"This," Sam went on softly, "is my pardner, Bob Law."

"Law? Also a most unusual name — here," Velez remarked meaningly.

"So I judge," Sam returned. "It was some scarce in some parts of New Mexico, too."

"Indeed? I am from there myself," Velez said.

"And the — ah, Mormon Kid — from there too?" Sam asked politely.

"Not me," the Kid denied swiftly. "I'm from California. Used to ride down in Utah. Got my name there."

"Oh, yes?"

"You have heard of the Mormon Kid before?" Velez queried carelessly. "I didn't know the name was mentioned."

"Yes, he was pointed out to us this afternoon," Sam stated. "He seems tuh be quite a prominent character hereabouts. How's yore hand, Kid? I see yuh got it all wrapped up."

Bob Law tensed himself for a desperate draw if the Mormon Kid exploded, but nothing happened. This fencing about wasn't in Bob's line and he didn't know whether he was going to stand the strain or not. Yet he had to thrill proudly at the consummate acting of his pardner. The others were acting too, and not badly; but they were not getting the better of the exchange.

The Mormon Kid smiled softly, but he didn't answer. Velez looked at him with surprise and then answered for him.

"The Kid received a painful rope burn this afternoon trying to hold a wild colt with his hands instead of snubbing it to the saddle horn," he explained.

"That's too dang bad," Sam sympathised. "Rope burns are darn mean things sometimes."

"But they do get well," the Mormon Kid volunteered.

"You were saying something about wanting work," Velez remarked. "I am happy to say that I need two good men. I am foreman for Tom Mercer. The ranch is on Portage River, eighteen miles from here. The wages will be fifty and board. It interests you?"

"Much," Sam grinned. "When do we report?"

"To-morrow — if you will be so good. You see, most of our cattle were wintered on the Fort Call bottoms. Indian range, you know. But we have to get off by a certain date or pay heavy fines, and the date limit is unpleasantly close."

There was a worried frown on Velez's face, and again Bob Law caught a glimpse of that cynical grin upon the Mormon Kid's face.

"We'll be there," Sam promised. "Thank goodness, here comes our chuck."

"And we have finished with ours," Velez smiled. "You will excuse us?"

"Most certainly."

"And permit me to pay your cheque," Velez urged as he rose.

"No, thanks, Mr. Velez," Sam refused, and for the first time there was a noticeable edge in his tone. "Until we're actually earnin' our grub on yore pay-roll we'll pay our own bills."

"As you will," Velez bowed.

"I'm no gunman," Bob Law whispered. "I'm no son of a gunman. I never claimed tuh be a gunman, an' I got no ambition tuh be one. But if anything like this ever happens again I'm shore gonna bust out an' shoot somebody."

"But why?" Sam grinned. "Shoot our new boss? Why, how ridiculous."

"Our new boss, huh? Ever know a cattle foreman before who asked his employees tuh excuse him from the table? Nossir, that hombre don't figger on us diggin' heavy into his pay-roll. Do yuh think he knows who you are?"

"I shore don't know, Bob."

"Well, are yuh sure that he's yore man?"

"No. If he's the murderer who shot my brother I'll kill him or he'll git me. But I can't afford tuh make a mistake. I've got to write back home for a more detailed description of the Velez I want, an' while I'm waitin' for that I'll be checkin' up his movements in this country. He may have an alibi, yuh know."

"An' while yo're waitin' tuh do that he'll be pattin' yuh into yore nice li'l grave, if he happens tuh suspect yuh. An' if he don't this Mormon Kid an' the Rockin' M will," Bob said.

"Did yuh notice that our friend, the Kid, is tryin' tuh keep his friends from findin' out what happened to-day? Velez believed that yarn about the rope. That Kid, I'm tellin' yuh, is in a mood tuh kill somebody to-night. Yuh notice that he's a two-gun man an' prob'ly as good with his left hand as he is with his right. Velez, like me, is satisfied tuh pack one gun."

"I reckon yo're right, an' it behooves us tuh keep kinda sheltered if we expect tuh draw any wages from old man Mercy, or whatever his name is," Bob remarked.

"Wrong again," Sam vetoed. "Knowin' how dangerous the man is, it's our duty tuh draw any wages from old man on him. We might save a life."

CHAPTER III

Fast Shooting

BONNEVILLE was in the deep snow country and from late October to late April the town was more or less moribund. True, there were a few local ranches which fed their stock hay in the vicinity, but the hay raised there wouldn't begin to feed all the animals that were summered on the vast stretch of range which lay to the north.

The bigger outfits trailed their stock out in the fall and wintered them on the low, warm swamps of the Fort Call Reservation, or took them farther out into the wide ranges of the Snake River desert.

In two weeks' time the snow would all be off the hill range except where it lay piled beneath the brow of the higher ridges. The dry, sickly yellowish grass would be curling up to make room for the green blades sprouting at their roots. From then on the range cattle could live easily, but as yet in only a few places had the grass got sufficient start to enable cattle to live. For the desert cattle, the difficulty was in getting them through the mountain ranges they would have to cross. The people in Bonneville knew that, and so they hadn't expected any riders from the Rocking M as yet, but the fact that the Mormon Kid had arrived indicated that they might have sent on an advance bunch of riders, and it was ample cause for worry among the local outfits whose range was constantly being threatened by the bigger outfit.

So critical had the situation become that some of them had already sold their cattle and bought sheep because the sheep range was as yet less crowded.

It happened that two of these cattlemen with ranches in Mound Valley reached town that evening, expecting to spend the night there and ride out to look at the range the next day. One was a little mouselike man by the name of Elmer Bench, who had worked his way into the business from two milk cows to about three hundred head of stock cattle. He was far more at home in a Sunday school than he was in the saddle. But his companion, Ray Bingham, was a giant in stature and not afraid of his weight in wildcats. Like Bench he had worked up from nothing. Now he ran a thousand or more cattle, but he owed for them. Bench's were clear.

Bench could never have been prevailed upon to enter a saloon alone, but Bingham towed him in regardless. The big fellow marched to the bar,

dragging his companion with him, and loudly invited the house to have a drink. There was a surge towards the bar. Most of the men present were residents of the town, or sheep camp movers, the latter reaching the range country first because they came in from the south.

"The invitation's general; we'd just as well drink with that hombre," Sam Crane said laughingly. "He might git offended if we didn't."

As they walked to the bar they saw that only one man had refused to move. It was the Mormon Kid. Apparently his friend Velez hadn't come in, for the Kid sat alone at a card table and twiddled his fingers.

"Hey there, you Mormon Kid — want a drink?" Bingham shouted.

The Mormon Kid landed on his feet with the quickness of a cat.

"Not with a pair of dirty cow milkers like you," he snarled. "I'd rather drink with a sheepherder. I don't even want to see you drink. If you lift a glass while I'm in this saloon I'll shoot it out of your hand."

"I told yuh he was full o' poison," Sam muttered into Bob's ear.

"That's carryin' things a bit fur, Mormon," Bingham said in a voice that trembled with anger. "If yuh don't wanta drink with me, that's yore privilege. But restrictin' my movements is somethin' else. Barkeep, fill up my glass."

Elmer Bench laid a hand upon his friend's arm.

"Don't do it, Ray," he begged. "Don't yuh see? It's just a trick tuh git a chance tuh kill yuh."

"Who asked you to horn in, runt?" the Mormon Kid shot out. "For one Mexican *centavo* I'd take my knife and trim that scraggy moustache of yours." His voice rose shrilly, and then a door leading to a back room opened and two heavily armed, evil-faced men surged into the bar-room.

"Wha's the matter, Kid? Some o' these Bonneville jaspers insultin' yuh?" one of them boomed.

He was fully as big as Bingham, both of them towering fully six inches above anybody else in the saloon, and being broad in proportion. A slack mouth and bleary eyes spoke eloquently of cruelty and dissipation.

"Insulted? Yes," the Kid smiled, "I was asked to drink with that line of lice there at the bar."

"I don't like the names he's callin' us," Sam whispered to his partner. "Leave the Kid to me — you shoot out the lights."

"Well, I certainly couldn't imagine a worse insult than that, could you, Nip?" the big fellow said to his partner.

The man addressed was fully as evil looking as the other, but he was compact and wiry in build and didn't look so dissipated. Of the two, Sam Crane decided that he was the more dangerous.

"Unless yuh eliminate them two on the end," the man called Nip said. "They look almost human."

There was a throaty snarl from the Mormon Kid. Sam Crane believed that the killer had really meant to fire at him before he did at the two men with whom he was ostensibly quarreling. The rest of the men at the bar were visibly ruing their acceptance of the invitation, and now they began to slink away.

"Stay where you are!" snapped the Mormon Kid, and the men stopped like so many statues.

"Git ready," Sam whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

He was certain now that the three Rocking M men had only been waiting for an opportunity to commit murder. He felt that he and Bob, as well as the big cowman were slated for salughter. He noticed that the Mormon Kid had moved so that he was closer to Sam and Bob than were the others. He had seen the fellow's lips moving in whispered instructions to his pals, and guessed the import. The Kid himself meant to fire at Sam, the man called Nip at Bob, and the big ruffian would attempt to deal with Ray Bingham. Bench, probably, wasn't worth their attention.

Sam knew that Bob wasn't remarkably fast with a gun, and it was doubtful whether Bingham was. The only way to save them was to get the bulge on the killers. A great coal oil lamp swung above their heads and lighted the entire bar-room. Sam moved slightly so that he was between Bob's right side and the Mormon Kid.

"Git that light, Bob," he whispered through lips that were apparently parted in a smile.

"Suppose," Sam said gently, addressing the Mormon Kid, "that we call all bets off."

The opaque eyes of the killer, which really had been watching him covertly all the time, were now turned squarely upon him.

"So you would call all bets off, eh?" the Kid sneered. "You have horned into my affairs just twice too many times, hombre. I'm just debating whether to sink a bullet into your carcass now or make you crawl across the floor and kiss my boots like your friend Fox did this afternoon."

"You try it, young feller, an' yuh'll accumulate more than a rope burn," Sam said in a voice that sounded fairly jocular.

The red blood of rage mounted slowly across the killer's dark, handsome face. It was the first time he had ever been challenged on the Bonneville range. For the moment he was as thunderstruck at his antagonist's effrontery as were the paralyzed denizens of the saloon. Then his left hand went to his gun in a swift, circular motion which brought the weapon up and out so swiftly that he seemed to have plucked it out of mid-air.

Clean, fast draw that it was it was no faster than that made by Sam Crane. But just the infinitesimal part of a second before either man pulled the trigger there came another shot, and the room was plunged into darkness and a

shower of glass from the broken lamp rained down between the two.

Sam cursed softly, for he knew that the sudden darkness had caused him to jerk his hand when he fired, and he had missed. But the fact that no bullet struck his own body indicated that it had had the same effect upon the Mormon Kid.

There were half a dozen more shots which stabbed through the darkness and most of them came from the three killers of the Rocking M. The saloon was a veritable bedlam as men yelled their fear and fought with each other for fancied shelter. Above the din rose the wild whoops of the man Bingham as he challenged his foes to fight like men.

Sam hadn't fired again, because he felt that it would be useless, and there was more chance of hitting a panic-stricken bystander than there was one of the outlaws.

The firing ceased abruptly as the crowd rushed through the doors, or leaped blindly through the windows. Presently the noise subsided so that little could be heard except the groans of two men who lay wounded upon the floor.

"Don't anybody shoot," came the bartender's voice. "I'm gonna light another lamp."

An instant later the feeble rays of a small lamp struggled to pierce the smoke-laden room. Sam, who had dropped to his knees at the foot of the bar, got to his feet and found Bob Law beside him. From the other end of the bar strode the man Bingham. But his friend Bench lay dead upon the floor with a bullet through the heart. With a sob the big man bent over his friend. When he straightened up his face was like an iron mask.

Save the bartender and the two wounded bystanders there was no one else in the room.

"Come on, barkeep, pour me another drink," Bingham shouted abruptly. "I'm still treatin' the house."

Hastily the men downed their drinks, disregarding the importunities of the two wounded men.

"Well, they got away with it again," Bingham said bitterly as he viewed the dead body of his friend.

"An' they'll do more than that if yuh try gittin' even with 'em," the bartender said.

"Well, they'll go some before they git me," Bingham thundered.

"What about your law here?" Sam demanded. "Here's two men shot up with no provocation, and an innocent man murdered in cold blood. Won't there be nothin' done about it?"

"There'll be less than nothin' done about it," Bingham answered. "The officers'll prob'ly make these jaspers admit that they shot themselves, an' prove that Bench committed suicide."

Sam and Bob now turned their attention to the wounded men. Apparently neither of them had been fatally hurt. Men began creeping timorously back to see what had happened, and somebody sent for a doctor.

Presently the two punchers slipped away from the crowd and went up to their room.

"Well, Samuel, I hope you finish up that li'l errand o' yours soon," Bob remarked. "It's too thick for me around here."

"Well, Robert, I've never seen a country that stood in greater need o' social reform, an' I hankers tuh be a reformer."

"I don't," Bob said bluntly. "I don't like reformers, an' I never knew 'em tuh reform anything anyway."

"But they use the wrong weapons. Tuh reform a place like this yuh don't want votes nor Bibles. What yuh've gotta have is six-guns."

"I'm still willin' tuh let 'em kill their own snakes," Bob declared. "From the samples I've seen I'm not fast enough on the draw tuh even give 'em good competition."

"Anyhow yuh shot out that light mighty fast, though if yuh'd lingered just a sec I'm sure Mr. Mormon Kid would have been where the wicked cease from troublin' an' the righteous are at rest."

"Light?" Bob said with amazement. "I never shot out no light."

"What? Then who the devil did? I was watchin' them three gunmen an' it wasn't none o' them."

"It was Señor Velez," Bob replied. "I caught a glimpse of him at the back of the saloon just a second before, an' I seen him draw. That's what I was speakin' of. Yo're fast, Sam, but yuh simply ain't in that hombre's class. If you ever kill Velez, Sam, you've gotta do it while he's asleep."

"If he's the man I think he is I'll git him," Sam gritted, "an' I'll do it while his eyes are open an' his hand on his gun."

There was no slumber for Bob Law that night. He knew what he had seen, and he knew that if there was ever a duel between those two his friend would die.

CHAPTER FOUR

What Looks Like Treachery

In the morning Sam and Bob had a short talk with Ray Bingham. He and Bench had been going out to inspect their range, but now, of course, it had to be postponed. But Bingham was anxious to get out there.

"I know there's no Rockin' M cattle there yit," he said, "but no tellin'

how many men they've sent up. There's a big bend in the Blacksnake River over there where she runs around a big, flat butte, where the grass comes a coupla weeks earlier than anywhere else on that part o' the range. That's where me an' Bench runs our stuff. The Rockin' M allus wanted it, an' I wouldn't be s'prised tuh find they had a camp in there."

"And if they have?" Sam queried.

"It won't make no difference. We kin git our cattle there before they can theirs, though I know there'll be a bloody fight before it's over. The Rockin' M will never be satisfied till they own the whole country, but they'll have tuh kill me before they git my range," Bingham declared.

"Whereabouts is Tom Mercer's range?" Sam asked.

"Right close tuh ours. In fact there's just a range trail from the reservation between. The rest of it lays up against the Rockin' M. Only it's always under snow about two-three weeks later than the rest. But they make up for that by havin' a stand-in on their side of the reservation where they can turn out early on the warm south hill slopes," Bingham explained. "Why do you ask about them?" he asked a moment later.

"We done hired out tuh work for 'em, an' are kinda interested in the kind of outfit they run," Sam said.

"So that's it," Bingham said. "Well, I believe in lettin' people find out such things fer themselves. So long." The man rode away.

"Don't wanta talk," Sam said. "Looks like we'd have tuh shag along out there an' find out for ourselves."

It was nearing noon when the two punchers arrived at the Mercer ranch. They had to ride through a field in order to reach the house, and on the way they saw a number of animals branded T O M.

"Kinda cumbersome, but he believes in lettin' people know whose they are," Sam remarked.

"Not easy worked over anyway," Bob said. "Sam, I gotta hunch we're ridin' into something here that's gonna be damned hard tuh git out of. Fox told us this Mercer had been shot, an' there's a girl in the case. We'll be workin' under this Mexican, Velez, an' if he did kill yore brother he's darn near certain tuh know who you are. If he does, Sam, yuh'll never have a chance."

"Not forgittin' that we didn't win the brotherly love of that Rockin' M bunch right off the bat," Sam added. "Tuh tell the truth, Bob, I wouldn't miss this even if Velez wasn't in the country."

"Yuh mean tuh horn into the fight against this Rockin' M outfit an' try tuh purify the country?"

"If the Mormon Kid an' those other two gazaboos were fair samples it could stand purifyin' a whole lot," Sam said. "But we're partners, Bob. We've agreed tuh stick together. It ain't too late tuh turn around if you say

the word. I was kinda forgittin' you when I walked into this, but if yuh'd rather drop it we'll ride."

"Come on," Bob laughed. "You know darn well that we've gotta see this thing through now. But — I've still got my hunch."

"I knew they couldn't drive yuh away, yuh bow-legged pelican," Sam smiled.

It was easy to see that the Mercer ranch had once known better days. It wasn't exactly run down, but it did seem as though an effort had been made to keep it up to its old-time standards, but hadn't quite made the grade for lack of funds.

A couple of men with gum boots on their feet and shovels on their backs were just coming in. The punchers waited for them without dismounting.

"Howdy, gents," Sam greeted them. "We hired out yesterday tuh work for Tom Mercer. Fernando Velez told us tuh come here. Is he around?"

"I don't reckon he is," one of the men said. "He left yesterday, an' I don't think he's been back."

"Who'll we report to then?"

"I reckon Bee is in the house. Since Tom got hurt she's kinda runnin' things. Better go on in."

The two punchers got off and dragged their spurs up to the door nearest the place where they had stopped. An Indian girl was just coming out to drain a huge kettle of boiled potatoes.

"Me like to see-um Miss Mercer — you sabbe?" Sam said.

The squaw poured off the last drop of steaming water and gave the kettle a dexterous flip. "Oh, Bee," she called. "There are two gentlemen out here who want to see you." Her strong white teeth flashed in a smile as she disappeared.

An embarrassed flush swept over Sam's tanned face. Bob tittered gleefully.

"How was I tuh know?" Sam demanded. "Gosh, she wore moccasins."

The next moment he came sharply to attention, as a girl of about twenty-two or three came to the door. She wore a gingham house dress with the sleeves rolled up above two rounded elbows, and there were several smudges of flour on her apron. Her face was flushed, and there were tiny drops of perspiration to show recent familiarity with a kitchen stove. Though straight and slender she carried an impression of graceful, tenacious strength. The boys made a swift notation of shiny black hair, soft, hazel eyes, a well set, delicate nose, and a wide, friendly mouth.

"Hello," she greeted. "Did you want to see me?"

"Yes, Miss, we kinda hired out as riders to a man by the name of Velez," Sam said. "He told us to come here."

"Oh," the girl said quickly. "Then Fernando did find somebody. I'm certainly glad he was able to get two good men."

There was a slight accent on the word "good" and the boys felt inclined to be flattered, though Sam said modestly:

"I reckon yo're just guessin' about the good part of it, ma'am."

"Am I? I'm quite sure that you are real riders. And we certainly need that kind." Her brow knitted in a little troubled frown, but quickly cleared. "I want you to come in and see my father. Dinner will be ready in half an hour."

Feeling somewhat awkward they tramped through the kitchen and dining room behind her and entered a spacious living room furnished in rich, warm colours. Upon a specially made bed beside a large sunny window lay a man of about fifty-five years. Despite the fact that he had been bedridden for over a year Tom Mercer still carried the marks of a range man in his cleanshaven face. Perhaps it was the slight squint of the eyes which comes from searching long distances, but anyway the boys knew they were looking at a man whose natural home was on the back of a horse. They felt a quick surge of pity for his condition.

"Father, these are two boys whom Fernando hired in Bonneville last night," Bee introduced. "They — haven't told me their names."

"I'm Sam Crane, an' my pardner is Bob Law. We're right glad tuh know yuh, Mr. Mercer," Sam said.

The cowman held out a thin, freckled hand.

"Set down boys," he invited. "Plumb glad tuh see yuh here. I'm needin' men. These local boys are all right, but here lately I can't keep 'em. Reckon it's on account of an outfit called the Rockin' M that's got most everybody bulldosed. Only got four riders right now besides my foreman, an' they shore ain't the fightin' type that it takes tuh go up against that outfit."

"We heard a li'l something about them Rockin' M fellers yesterday," Sam volunteered. "In fact some of 'em was in town."

"Already?" Mercer asked sharply.

"Now don't get fretted, Dad," the girl spoke up. "You know they won't bother our range as long as Fernando is on the job."

"I have got a good foreman," Mercer acknowledged. "He's a Mexican, but a darned high-class one, an' one o' the best cowmen I ever knew. Moreover, nobody puts anything over on him."

"If it hadn't been for him we would have been bankrupt," Bee Mercer put in. "I don't think we could ever have found another man who would have done as much for us."

Sam grasped the fact that they feared Bob and he would be prejudiced against the foreman on account of his nationality, and were trying to overcome such prejudice.

"I'm plumb glad tuh hear that," he said. "I come from down near the border myself, an' I know a heap o' Mexicans. Like anybody else they run

all grades. As yuh say, the high-class ones are fine people."

He saw an expression of relief cross the girl's face.

"If you'll excuse me now I'll finish getting dinner," she said.

Sam's eyes lingered upon the girl until she disappeared. He coloured slightly as he saw her father watching him.

"If I do say it myself there never was a finer girl made than Bee," Mercer said proudly. "She's sure been good tuh me, but I'd ruther be dead than be a drag on her the way I've been."

"She wouldn't agree with yuh there," Sam said. "Just how did yore accident happen?"

"Somebody just took a shot at me from behind a tree, that's all I know," Mercer said grimly. "I was ridin' on the reservation at the time, but I'm sure it wasn't an Indian. They've always been friendly."

"Anybody with you?" Sam asked.

"Not right then. Fernando, my foreman, had gone up there with me, but he'd gone on to an Injun camp tuh see about gittin' some young bucks tuh help us trail up from the Bottoms. He come along an' found me an hour or so later."

Sam and Bob's eyes met for an instant. Sam's brother had also been shot in the back, but he had been luckier than Mercer. He had died.

"Yuh say you're not havin' any particular trouble on the range now?" Sam said casually.

"Only that we're short-handed," Mercer said. "Our range is late. Two-thirds of my stuff is down on the Bottoms, an' the other third is runnin' on the reservation just a few miles from here. If Fernando don't git more help we'll have trouble gittin' our stuff off the reservation, an' the damn agent is gittin' more strict about it every year."

"No trouble with the Rockin' M then?" Sam persisted.

"Not yet. They ride the other outfits' range like they owned it, but Fernando says they ain't give him much trouble. They'd better not if they know what's safe for 'em. But of course the cattle business is in an awful slump, an' I've been danged hard run for money."

Finding sympathetic listeners the man talked on. It was plain that his financial circumstances were such that it wouldn't take much hard luck to break him. He felt his helplessness keenly, but it was also clear that he placed the utmost confidence in his foreman.

Presently Bee came in to announce dinner and the boys asked permission to retire to the bunkhouse to wash. As they went out they saw two Indian bucks outside the house talking in low, guttural tones to the Indian woman they had seen. The men were fine looking fellows, and were dressed exactly like any white cowboy except that one of them, a man of about forty, had his hair long, and it was covered by a gorgeous purple bandanna. His com-

panion was a younger man who wore his hair short.

"Robert, my son," Sam said in a low tone, "I figger our presence is some badly needed here. A bed-ridden cripple an' a girl with a good range an' a lot o' cattle. Can yuh imagine easier pickin's fer an outfit like the Rockin' M?"

"An' a foreman like Fernando Velez," Bob added. "The trust they put in him is plumb pitiful."

"One thing is certain," Sam said. "Velez ain't tellin' 'em the truth. People in Bonneville know he's thick with the Rockin' M, but they don't know it."

"Then we'd better tell 'em right now," Bob said.

"Nix!" Sam vetoed. "He's a trusted foreman — we're just a coupla hobo waddies. They wouldn't believe it. We've gotta go ahead like we accepted their estimation of Velez until we git the actual truth."

"Guess that's best," Bob admitted.

"But I've made up my mind tuh one thing," Sam said soberly. "Nobody is gonna git the best o' old man Mercer an' that girl as long as I got my health."

Bob looked at his friend queerly.

"Remember Fox tellin' us that Velez wanted tuh marry Bee Mercer, an' that she wouldn't have him?"

"I remember," Sam acquiesced.

"But still she shore thinks he's O.K.," Bob pointed out.

"He may be. He may be," Sam said hurriedly. "But I shore mean tuh find out."

CHAPTER FIVE

An Alibi for Velez

THOUGH dinner had been promised immediately it was another half-hour before the men were summoned from the bunkhouse. There were three ranch hands besides Sam and Bob in the bunkhouse, and places had been set for the two Indians at the foot of the table. Tom Mercer's bed had been rolled into the dining room and up to the table, but neither Bee nor the Indian woman ate with the men.

No sooner had Sam Crane entered the house the second time than he sensed that something had gone wrong in the few minutes they had been in the bunkhouse, and he instantly associated it with the two Indians. He looked at them searchingly, but their sombre faces revealed nothing. They

waited in silence to be served, and when they were, they applied themselves strictly to the business of eating, handling their knives and forks a little awkwardly.

Several times Tom Mercer asked them questions, but their replies were always in monosyllables. Sam observed, however, that the men wore the badges of the Indian police force under their lapels.

"How's my cattle doin' up there on the windy ridges, Ketchpaw?" Mercer demanded at last. "You come by there. How much grass?"

"Plenty — grass," the older Indian answered without looking up.

"Uh-huh. Yuh say that like somethin' else was short," Mercer said irritably.

"Me say — plenty grass. White man always find plenty grass on Injun's land. Injun cow come on white man's land — white man chut-um," the Indian said glumly. "Injun chut-um white man's cow — white man chut-um Injun. Injun chut-um white man — hang-um Injun."

The Indian girl appeared in the door and spoke softly to the Indians in the native tongue.

"What's that, Bearskin — has there been a killin'?" Mercer demanded of the younger Indian. Apparently he understood some Shoshoni.

"Uh!" the Indian grunted. "Last ten days two Injun found dead."

"By thunder, I don't like it!" Mercer stormed. "Somebody is deliberately causin' trouble. Lord, I wish I was out o' here. Ketchpaw — Bearskin, you both know I've always befriended you Indians."

"We know," Bearskin grunted. "But half-breeds make bad talk."

"I know there's somethin' wrong," Tom Mercer stormed. "If yuh think it ain't hell tuh have tuh lay here like a dead log an' ——"

"Father, please," Beatrice begged. "There's really nothing wrong. And, if there is, Fernando can handle it."

"An' we want yuh tuh know that if there should be any trouble, that we'll be leggin' for yuh same as if it was our own outfit," Sam put in.

"I'm sure you will," Bee thanked him.

The Indians had left the table, and when the boys came out they were riding away. Bob went on to the bunkhouse, but Sam waited until the girl came out.

"We're ready tuh start workin', miss," he said. "I hope this trouble ain't serious.

"I'm afraid it is," she said. "We just can't get along without Indian range in the spring. Those policemen brought word that on account of those killings we must get our cattle off at once — and we have no place to take them. Our range is snowed under."

"Yuh mean they think it's yore outfit that's been slaughterin' Injuns?"

"I'm afraid so. Father was careful to say that he didn't blame the Indians

because he got shot, even though it was on the reservation, but Ketchpaw says that certain half-breeds are telling that we do. They are blaming Fernando."

"Yuh right sure, Miss, that he's plumb innocent?" Sam queried innocently.

"Fernando? Why, I know he is! He can use a gun when he has to, but a finer man never lived. I'd stake my life on his integrity," the girl flamed.

"Miss Mercer, will yuh pardon a question that's plumb personal, an' mebbe a little insultin', though I don't mean it tuh be? I wouldn't ask it, only I wanta do my best tuh serve yore interests."

"Why, I suppose so," the girl said with surprise.

"How long have yuh known this Fernando Velez?"

"Why, about twelve years."

"Twelve years!"

"Yes. Why do you seem so surprised?"

"Because, tuh tell the truth, I didn't think you'd known him that long. But I'm still gonna ask that question, though mebbe I shouldn't. Miss Mercer, a man down in Bonneville told us that Velez wanted to marry you, an' that you'd refused him. Is that right?"

Bee Mercer's cheeks flamed.

"That is an impudent question, to say the least," she said, "but I'll answer it. Fernando hasn't asked me to marry him, and I don't know that I'd refuse him if he did."

"I'm sorry," Sam said humbly. "I guess I've got Mr. Velez all wrong."

"I know. It's race prejudice," she said hotly. "If you can't work under Fernando with the same loyalty that you could give any other man you had as well go."

"Ma'am, I ain't even stained with race prejudice," Sam denied. "If Velez is loyal to you I'll be loyal to him. An' so will my partner."

The girl's face softened.

"I believe you, and you must pardon me for being too blunt spoken. But it means so much to me. There's still a chance for father to get well if we can keep from going broke. We try to keep all bad news from him, but I've got to admit that things look bad. I'm sure this Rocking M outfit is behind all the trouble, and we've got to depend entirely upon Fernando."

"No, yuh ain't, miss," Sam Crane declared, but the words were spoken under his breath and after he had taken his departure.

The Mercer cow camp was located about fifteen miles from the ranch on a small stream known as Trapper creek, and it was on the reservation. Sam and Bob were instructed to ride up there that evening and be ready for work in the morning. Bee assured them that they would find plenty of horses in the cavvy, and she was sure that Velez would be at the camp either that night or the next morning to give them detailed instructions.

They were glad to get busy, but for the first time there was a worry on Sam Crane's mind which he wouldn't disclose to his partner. Bee Mercer had said that she might not refuse to marry Velez if he asked her, and Sam could certainly see no reason why any man should neglect to ask her if he had the opportunity. Velez certainly couldn't be insensible to her charms. Why it should worry him so Sam didn't exactly know, but he was worried, and he couldn't tell Bob.

"Did you find out any more about Velez?" Bob queried as they rode along.

"Only this," Sam said casually. "He ain't the man I'm lookin' for. Marve was killed three years ago, an' Velez has been here twelve."

Bob exhaled a mighty sigh of relief.

"Thank God for that," he said. "I feel like yuh'd just set right up in yore coffin after I figgered yuh same as dead."

"But I'm still believin' that the Rockin' M is out tuh break the Mercer lay-out, an' the evidence all indicates that Velez is in with 'em just like the beans in a pot o' chili. But until we know for sure we're just a pair o' good little cowboys strivin' tuh please," Sam said.

Fernando Velez didn't arrive at the cow camp until after nine o'clock the next morning. Sam and Bob had had opportunity to get acquainted with the two riders already at the camp. One was named Charley Bishop; the other Loren Allstead. Sam, at least, was agreeably surprised to find that they seemed to know their business. One wouldn't pick them for fighting men, but they were intelligent, likeable boys and devoted to their outfit. They were frankly worried, however, over the situation confronting them, and in considerable fear of trouble with the Indians.

"I don't mean there'll be any massacre or anything like that," Charley Bishop explained. "If an Indian wants tuh murder anybody now he has tuh do it like a white man. I don't believe they'll do any shootin', but I am scared they'll come an' take us tuh the agency under arrest, an' then Gawd only knows what they'll do tuh the cattle."

The boys were able to get a good conception of the range they were to work on. To the north and west of them lay a high mountain range still covered with deep snow. The range the Mercer cattle were on was a series of long ridges running down from those mountains and exposed to the south so that the snow had been gone several weeks and the feed was good.

A small river known as the Portage headed a few miles farther north and came by a mile below the cow camp. On the other side of the river was another mountain range called the Aspen Hills, running north and south. The west side of this range was abrupt and rocky, and almost destitute of vegetation. On the other side of it lay the regular summer range of practically all the cow outfits. There was still much snow on the high table land

around the head waters of the river, and the only possible pass through these mountains was a low saddle some five or six miles from the cow camp, peculiarly dubbed the "What Creek Pass."

When Fernando Velez arrived it was through this pass. The two men with him were the gunmen who had flanked the Mormon Kid that night in the Pioneer saloon.

"I wonder what they've done with the Kid?" Sam muttered.

"I'll bet they could sing Sweet Adeline if they had him, there's that much harmony," Bob agreed.

Velez saw them on a ridge and waved for them to ride down. He was smiling pleasantly. "Glad to see that you got here, boys," he said, "and glad that I found you so easily. These are two of the Rocking M riders, Nip Neeves and Monk Hooten."

"Yeah, we kinda met 'em in Bonneville night before last," Sam remarked.

Monk Hooten's evil face wore a heavy scowl, but Neeves managed a grin. "Yuh was in damn poor comp'ny then," he said. "I like yore style better now."

"Still, the company we was in managed tuh hold the floor after you birds had hunted shelter," Sam retorted.

"If some damn fool hadn't shot out the lights ——" Hooten began.

"It was probably lucky for both sides," Velez said. "But we've no time for post-mortems now. We've got to reach the Bottoms to-day and it'll be a long, hard ride. I want one of you boys to go with us."

"One of us?" Sam exclaimed. "How come?"

"It's because you are strangers to the range. I'd like you to remain here with Loren Allstead while your partner and Charley Bishop comes with me. Rounding up on the Bottoms and trailing back is going to be a big job. I'll get some help from the Rocking M outfit, and I'll be able to hire a few young bucks to help, but I'll need Charley because he knows the trails. I wouldn't like to leave two strangers with the stuff here, though at least one good level head will be needed. So I'm leaving you and young Allstead together. He's a good boy and knows the range, but I'm leaving you in charge, understand?"

"Thanks." The foreman's reasoning was perfectly sound, and the boys couldn't object, though a separation under the present crucial status of affairs was distasteful to both.

While Bob and Charley were getting ready to leave Velez gave Sam his final instructions. "In brief," he concluded, "there'll be little to do except keep anything from going back to the ranch, and keep the weak stuff from hogging in the snowdrifts in the afternoon."

"But I understand we're on the reservation," Sam said mildly. "Suppose the Indians order us off?"

It was a minute or more before the foreman answered. Sam saw his teeth bite into his lip, and there was a sombre, cloudy look in his eyes.

"In that case," he said finally, "I'll expect you to do the best you can."

"It's just exactly what I'll do," Sam promised.

The chance to exercise that authority was not long delayed. That afternoon Sam found three weak young heifers which had broken through the thawing crust of a drift while trying to get from one ridge to another. They had floundered a little and stuck. They had to be pulled out immediately, or they would freeze and die during the night.

He had dragged one of them to safety after considerable difficulty in breaking a trail to them, and had his rope around the neck of the second one when he saw young Allstead appear on the top of a ridge above him and gaze around wildly. Then, catching sight of Sam the young puncher raced down to him as fast as his horse would go. His face was like a sheet.

"My Lord, Crane, we gotta do somethin'," he said. "I just saw Ketchpaw an' he says they've found another murdered Injun. He said the agent has told a bunch o' half-breed punchers tuh move all cattle off, an' they'll be here in the mornin' tuh do it. The boss of 'em is a breed by the name o' Turk Donald, an' he's meaner'n poison."

"Half-breeds, huh," Sam murmured. "Sounds like trouble." He was much more excited than he let on. There would be serious trouble if the cattle weren't moved — and Bee Mercer had told him there was no place to move them.

"All Ketchpaw would say was that we'd better git tuh movin' 'em on to our own range," the puncher went on. "But it's only a snow field," he wailed and turned his horse.

"Here, where yuh goin'?" Sam demanded.

"To the ranch tuh tell Bee," Allstead said.

"Nothin' doin'," Sam shouted. "That girl can't do nothin', so what's the use o' makin' her miserable?"

But young Allstead was on his way, and in very much of a funk. The only way to have stopped him would have been to run him down and rope him. Reluctantly Sam let him go.

Then he hung his rope on the last heifer and dragged her to safety.

CHAPTER SIX

A Timely Interference

By the time Sam had completed his rescue work Loren Allstead was out of sight. Sam shrugged his shoulders and coiled up his rope. He didn't know

just how to deal with the situation himself, but he certainly wasn't minded to appeal to a girl and a helpless old man.

Suddenly it occurred to him that the people to see were the Indians who were threatening all the trouble. Evidently they had had plenty to arouse them, but he thought they ought to realise that it wasn't the fault of the Mercers. Young Allstead had just been talking with Ketchpaw of the Indian Police, so surely the man couldn't be far away.

He climbed to the top of a long ridge, and followed it back to where it broke off above a small, flat valley. At the mouth of a cove about a mile away he saw an Indian camp. It was nearly sundown then, and the smoke was rising from the camp-fires. He stopped his horse and contemplated the situation. There might be danger going down there, he realised, but he felt that it would be better to try to have a straight talk with the Indians. The two he had seen at the Mercer dinner table had seemed to be intelligent men, if a little sullen.

He was about to ride on, when a brutal oath assailed his ears. It was off to his left, under the brow of a ridge, and remembering that there had been several murders lately he felt that an investigation was imperative. He spurred his horse over to a draw that came up the other side of the ridge, and it was filled with a growth of quaking aspens. It was easy for him to ride down through the trees unseen, but he heard plenty of lewd, profane sentences before he got down to where he could see the cause.

What he saw brought a furious curse to his own lips. Neeves and Hooten, the men he had seen with Fernando Velez that morning, hadn't gone to the Bottoms after all. Now he could see them on their horses, and each man had his rope on a young Indian girl, and was forcing her to trail along beside his horse.

Neither girl was over sixteen, and being Indian they wouldn't yield to tears, but Sam needed only a glance to see that they were sick with fright, and utterly powerless to oppose their tormentors.

The oaths were coming from Monk Hooten. Nip Neeves was talking just as much, but less violently.

"Come on, you purty li'l squaws," the man was saying. "Just as well give up now an' give us a kiss, or we'll drag yuh so far yore tootsies'll be stickin' outa yore moccasins before yuh even start tuh walk back." Occasionally the men varied their amusement by spurring their horses suddenly and jerking the unfortunate girls almost off their feet.

With eyes blazing with anger, and a face white beneath the tan Sam Crane burst from the aspens and charged down upon the two ruffians. He was within long revolver range before they heard him and looked around. They grabbed for their guns, and Sam dropped his hand upon the handle of his, though he didn't finish the draw then. The bullies were handicapped

by their ropes. They each held the coils in their left hands and had a single dally around the saddle horn so that they could let out or take up the slack at will, no matter what the girls did, and their bridle reins were in their right hands.

Hooten whirled his horse so suddenly that the girl he was leading was knocked down. Seeing Sam bearing down upon him with terrific speed the fellow suddenly cast loose his dally and dropped the rope. He caught up his bridle reins with one hand and threw down upon the charging cowboy.

Then Sam's gun whipped upward, and Hooten bawled out in agony and dropped his gun as a bullet ploughed its way along his forearm. Sam didn't want to kill either of the men unless he had to, but he intended to leave his mark upon them. He turned his instant attention to Nip Neeves, but his finger didn't quite release the trigger. Being quicker witted than his partner Neeves had jerked the slender Indian girl up beside his horse, and with a swoop of his arm swung her up in the saddle in front of him, while he kept his horse headed toward Sam with the other hand, in which he held his gun as well as the bridle reins.

"Easy there," the fellow shouted. "You'll plug the gal if yuh shoot. He was entirely too busy to be able to use his own gun, and couldn't have hit anything if he could have used it, now that the girl had released her arms enough to make a struggle that was keeping him plenty busy.

"Drop the girl, Neeves, or I'll kill you," Sam gritted as he spurred closer to where he knew he would quickly get a chance to use his gun.

"Damn glad tuh drop the hell-cat of a squaw if you'll promise not tuh shoot," the fellow panted.

"All right, let her down."

Neeves let the girl fall to the ground, but she was up with the quickness of a cat, and in a trice she used an arm she had freed to whip a knife from her belt to slash the rope in two with one swift stroke. The other girl had already got out of Hooten's rope.

Sam waited, rather hoping the scoundrel would attempt to shoot, but Neeves dropped his gun back in the holster.

"Hell of a trick tuh do tuh Hooten there — cripplin' him up away out here," the fellow complained.

"I'd have shot him in the head only I figgered it was solid wood an' a bullet there wouldn't hurt him," Sam retorted. "I'd orta kill yuh both, but I reckon I'll let the Indians do it." Both outlaws went a shade paler.

"Here, fer Gawd's sake, yuh can't turn against a white man," Neeves protested. " 'Sides, we was only funnin' with the gals. We didn't mean no harm. Why, they're only kids."

"I see they're only kids," Sam shot back. "That just makes what yuh done doubly contemptible."

"Mebbe we got too rough, but honest we was just playin' with the damn li'l squaws," Neeves pleaded. "These Injuns are sore at all white punchers now anyway. It'd make an awful mess if they done anything tuh us. You let us go an' we'll promise tuh stay clean off the reservation."

"All right," Sam said, unable to conceal the loathing he felt. "I'll let yuh go, but you keep off my reservation too, do yuh git me? Git movin', an' don't look back."

Hooten climbed down and got his rope and gun, all the time whimpering with pain and sending furtive murderous glances toward the man who had wounded him, and at the still cowering girls. Neeves disdained to pick up the end of his rope that had been cut off.

One of the girls picked up the four-foot piece of rope and timorously handed it up to Sam after the two outlaws were on their way. Having no use for it Sam mechanically tossed it back to her. He looked at the two girls and smiled in a way that brought sheepish, responsive grins to their faces.

"Where's yore ponies?" he asked. "I'll git 'em for you." He wasn't taking any chances of having jargon talk replied to this time in perfect English. He suspected there was a mighty good school at the Agency.

"We had no ponies," replied the girl Neeves had captured. "We were out digging roots maybe one mile from here when up comes these bad men and down come ropes. They drag us ever since."

"Well, I'm goin' yore way an' yuh can take turns ridin' behind me if yuh want," he offered.

The girls looked at each other and giggled; their recent fears seemingly forgotten.

"Look!" Hooten's girl cried suddenly. "Your father!"

Galloping wildly down another draw now came Ketchpaw.

The big Indian policeman slowed his horse to a dignified walk before he joined them, but his face was grim. He looked at Sam, then grunted an inquiry at his daughter.

In terse gutturals the girl, who was really pretty, explained matters. Sam knew when she got to the part where he had shot Hooten by her pantomime. A sudden glow lighted the big Indian's eyes. When his daughter had finished he rode up and extended his hand to Sam.

"You *hointz* — my friend. Rockin' M men — *kay wino*. You chut-um one man — Ketchpaw chut-um two men mebbe."

"Don't blame yuh a bit," Sam said.

"Three Injun — he die — chut-um in back — white men chut-um. Mebbe so find out now who chut-um," Ketchpaw said grimly.

"Mebbe so," Sam agreed. He was thinking that it was like these two killers to go around shooting inoffensive Indians in the back. And he couldn't help remembering that Fernando Velez had been riding with them. Actually

there was no reason to suppose that Velez was a killer, now that the man seemed to have an alibi for that murder in New Mexico which Sam had suspected him of, but still the puncher couldn't quite rid his mind of the memory that Velez was the name his brother Marve had given as his slayer.

"By the way, Ketchpaw," he said, "what's this about us havin' tuh move our cattle? We can't do it. There's no place to go."

"Me Injun police. Agent say chaseum off all white man cattle. Me say: 'Tom Mercer — heap good friend of Injun'.' Agent say: 'Me send Turk Don'l for Injun cattle boss. You tell-um white man move cattle. No move-um then Turk Don'l move-um. Anybody try stop-um — Injun police take-um Agency," Ketchpaw explained.

Sam perceived that the big Indian was helpless to serve his white friends if he had wanted to. He shrewdly suspected that Agency politics, or pull, had something to do with the matter. On the reservation the agent was an autocrat, and if he ordered a crew of half-breeds to remove foreign cattle they would be protected no matter what nefarious thing they did. There was no mistaking the fact that things looked mighty black for the Mercers.

"Can't you even give us a few days?" Sam almost begged. "The snow's goin' off and Mercer's range'll be open in a week or so."

"No time," Ketchpaw said.

"What about the cattle on the Bottoms?" Sam demanded. It had occurred to him that they might be in more dangerous circumstances than even the ones in his charge.

"Agent give-um two weeks. But Velez he mus' start round-up purty damn quick."

Sam cursed under his breath. That there was a damnable conspiracy on foot to break the Mercers, probably to rob them, he was certain; and he was equally sure that Fernando Velez and the Rocking M outlaws were concerned in it. What they could hope to win if the cattle branded T O M should starve to death he couldn't imagine.

Then suddenly he believed that he had it. About one-third of Mercer's cattle were here. If they should all die it would certainly break him. The rest of the cattle and the ranch would have to be sold immediately under the most adverse conditions. The Rocking M owners would buy them in dirt cheap. But the real value to the Rocking M would be the strategic importance of the Mercer ranch and range. With that under their control they would be able to completely crush the other small outfits which still held out against them.

"You say the Agent gave Velez two weeks to get the cattle off the Bottoms?" Sam queried.

"Two weeks. Mebbeso have to. Mebbeso Tom Mercer ketch-um talking paper from Uncle Sam over there. Over here — ketch-um nothing."

"All right," Sam said. "Guess there's no use me goin' any further now."

The big Indian grunted an order to the two girls and they set out hurriedly for their camp, though Ketchpaw's daughter looked back over her shoulder and suddenly threw a kiss to the good-looking puncher. Then both girls giggled and scurried up the draw. Sam saw Ketchpaw pass them indifferently; then he turned his horse and rode back to camp.

A clash with the deadly killers of the Rocking M was now certain. Every day that he remained in the country would be a gamble with death, but not once did it enter his mind to think of leaving. He had entered the fight with his eyes open and he meant to see it through. Though at first it had only been to get Fernando Velez if he was the man he thought he was, and to challenge the insolent rule of the Rocking M, his most powerful motive now he admitted honestly was to try to save Tom Mercer and his daughter from utter ruin.

There were nearly a thousand head of cattle under his charge. If the Indians moved them off of the reservation it seemed that they would die, if what he had been told about the range was true. The only thing to do then was to hold them where they were. He couldn't guess how many Indians and half-breeds would be sent to move them, but assuredly there would be more than one or two men could contend with. He must play for time, and he had conceived a plan which might save the cattle, but which would assuredly make Fernando Velez show his hand.

He felt sure that his meeting with Ketchpaw hadn't been as barren of results as it had seemed to be at the time. And no matter what the ultimate result might be he was pleasurably tickled every time he thought of his brush with Neeves and Hooten. He had wounded Hooten and forced Neeves to beg for mercy, but he knew that the one would never forget the injury, nor the other the insult. He would hear from them again, and he didn't care much how soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam Makes a Bluff Stick

Sam Crane had cooked his supper and gone to bed before the thud of horse's hoofs brought him up on one elbow. It proved to be young Loren Allstead returning from the ranch.

"Well," Sam remarked as the puncher came dragging his saddle up to the tent, "did you succeed in scaring the daylights outa the folks down there?"

"I couldn't help it," Allstead defended. "Somethin' had tuh be done."

"Yeah? An' just what will be done?"

"Well, Bee said she'd be out here to-morrer tuh talk tuh the Injuns. Said she'd come to-night, but that ole Tom mustn't be alarmed about it."

"Uh-huh," Sam grunted, and turned over on his face.

He was thoroughly disgusted, but there would be no use to upbraid the young fellow who, after all, had thought he was acting for the best. But he knew that the presence of Bee Mercer on the range the next day was liable to complicate matters to a dangerous extent.

He was rather proud to think, however, that she had refused to tell her father, and add to his worries. Everything showed that she was gamely trying to shoulder all the burden, and spare old Tom as much as possible. A girl like that was not likely to lose her head.

They were up early the next morning, and Sam caught for himself the best horse in the cavvy, a rangy bay called Felix.

"You better stick around till Miss Mercer comes, an' stick to her side like a cockle-burr as long as she's here," Sam told Loren Allstead. "Yuh sure yuh got plenty shells for that gun?"

"Yes," the boy said, and Sam noticed how white his lips were.

But he also noted approvingly a look of grim do-or-die determination in the youth's eyes. He believed that Loren would die before he would allow harm to come to Bee Mercer. That was one relief.

At the same time Sam had a mighty homesick feeling for Bob Law as he rode away from the camp. Old Bob wasn't so fast with a gun, but he had the courage of a lion and he would be right there on deck when the test came. It meant something to have the backing of such a man.

Early as it was when Sam reached the heart of the early range he suddenly heard a volley of shots and a succession of wild whoops off to his left. Already the reservation riders were engaged in chasing the Mercer cattle off the only feed in the country.

Sam continued his climb until he got to the top of one of the highest ridges. One side of it was still under snow, and so he was ahead of all the cattle. He turned and rode along it until he was where he could look down upon most of the cattle.

Because the only feed as yet was on the bare, sunny south slopes, the cattle, approximately a thousand head, weren't scattered as they would be later on. Almost it could be said that they were in one herd, though spread over a number of ridges over a stretch of country some eight or ten miles long, and perhaps three or four miles wide, and they were split into bunches by many long snowdrifts, for the ridges weren't all parallel, and none of them ran exactly straight.

The sight which met Sam Crane's gaze brought a bitter oath to his lips. He judged that there must be between twenty and thirty horsemen actively

engaged in chasing the cattle, and at least that many more seemed to be spectators. The way the job was being done was nothing short of a crime.

It had been a hard winter and the cattle were poor when turned out. As always, when first turned upon grass they became weaker. Common sense required that they be moved slowly if moved at all, but the half-breed riders with shouts and shots, and belabourings with their lasso ropes forced the animals to move at a run.

Nor was that all. As soon as a bunch could be collected above some particularly steep snowdrift they would be hazed wildly over the edge of it. Sam saw cows roll end over end sometimes as far as three hundred feet. He saw some of them escape apparently unhurt. Others lay still for a few minutes, and then got up and staggered away. Still others lay quiet with their heads bent back under them suggestively. Their necks were broken. A number of others hit the snow with such force that they broke through so far that their legs caught and they could only flounder helplessly for a while and then drop. They would stay there and die unless dragged out. All in all the Indians were having a hilarious time.

The half-breeds, of course, were not particular whether they got everything or not. Not being particular whether their beef was fat or lean, a certain number left behind after they were all supposed to have been moved off would be a decided asset.

Sam soon picked out a cross ridge where he thought he could intercept the greater number of the active riders and started Felix down it at a fast run.

He was aware that any attempt to stop the atrocity by force would result in disaster. The reservation riders knew that they had the backing of the agent, and that meant the law. They were numerous enough to have their own way, and would doubtless welcome an excuse to bump off any white man who tried to interfere. He had to try to run a bluff, and if that failed his next move must be dictated by circumstances.

Those who were not helping to drive the cattle, but were only gleeful spectators, were trying to cut across to where they could see each bunch of cattle stampeded over the comb of a drift. Apparently they were all Indians, and from their delighted antics it seemed to be great fun. The thought that fun for them meant tragedy and heartbreak for Tom and Bee Mercer brought a burst of tremendous anger to Sam Crane.

As he urged his horse to a dangerous speed down a wet and slippery slope Sam passed within two hundred yards of the largest bunch of these spectators. He had meant to ignore them, but as his gaze swept over them he gave a startled ejaculation. They had stopped to view proceedings, and among them, cool as any king in his own drawing-room, sat the Mormon Kid.

Sam checked Felix so suddenly that the horse almost lost his footing, and slid for a couple of rods. But by the time the horse gathered himself the

rider had changed his mind and urged him on to his original course. But Sam's ears caught the sound of an amused, sardonic laugh that he knew had come from the Mormon Kid.

Five minutes later Sam overhauled a party of eight dark half-breeds who were hazing about twenty head of cattle down to meet another bunch above a high, steep drift. He saw at once that they were all armed, and there were ugly leers upon their faces. He was well aware that reservation half-breeds, usually looked down upon by both whites and Indians, would be ugly customers to deal with when there was little danger to themselves.

He had spotted the man who was waving directions before he joined them, and disregarding the scowls of the others as they deliberately whirled their horses in front of him he kept Felix dodging skilfully until he reached that man's side.

His eyes rested upon one of the ugliest men he had ever seen in his life. He had always been slightly amused at the word "red" when applied to an Indian, but here was one whose complexion was nearer red than anything else. Sam was sure the man wasn't more than an eighth Indian if he was that. His hair was dark brown, but his skin was red — the red of a ripe tomato, and a lot of it had peeled off by the reflection of the sun upon the white surface of the snowdrifts he had crossed. He was tall, slim and angular, with a goose neck and a huge, crooked nose like the handle of a pitcher. A pair of small, beady, blue eyes that could stare with the fixity of a rattlesnake completed the picture. "Say, are you the man who's runnin' this rampage?" Sam demanded crisply.

"Who wants to know?" the fellow demanded arrogantly.

"I do," Sam retorted evenly. "I happen tuh have charge of these cattle. Is youre name Turk Donald?"

"It is. What of it?"

"Simply this: Yo're movin' these cattle in the wrong direction."

"I'm movin' 'em off this reservation," Donald shot out. "Git out of our way or I'll move you along with 'em."

Sam was now surrounded by at least twenty of the breeds, and the Indian bystanders he had passed had now moved closer to see what happened next. He saw the Mormon Kid among them — an interested spectator. Every breed there with the exception of Donald himself had his hand upon his gun. Evidently the leader felt it would be beneath his dignity.

"Just one minute before yuh do any movin' like that," Sam said coldly. "I've got orders tuh move 'em one way an' you the other. They can't go both ways at once."

"You got orders," the man sneered, "from that silly fool of a girl, Bee ——"

"Donald, leave that girl's name off yore filthy tongue, or I'll shoot the guts outa yuh before these breeds o' yores can move a hand," Sam inter-

rupted in a tense voice, and a quick shadow of fear curtained the beady blue eyes. Sam had spoken as though he knew his ability to make good the threat.

"Why, you fool," the breed mouthed, "a dozen bullets would make a sieve out of your carcass if I made one sign."

"An' one bullet will drill a hole through yours if yuh go tuh make that sign," Sam retorted undaunted.

The Indians had crowded around until they made a ring around the inner circle of breeds, in the centre of which was Sam and Turk Donald. At that moment Sam hadn't the slightest fear of the half-breeds. He was sure that he had Donald's number. The fellow was as yellow as he was depraved. But he did fear that at any moment a bullet might strike him in the back from the gun of the Mormon Kid, and he didn't dare to take his eyes off Donald to look around. It was a tense moment, with death hinging upon a word.

Sam didn't see the Mormon Kid lay his hand furtively upon a gun, nor even know anything about it because before the Kid could draw one of Ketchpaw's hands touched the Kid lightly upon the shoulder, while with a significant gesture with the other hand the big Indian policeman touched the star upon his breast. The Mormon Kid shrugged and removed his hand from his gun.

"These cattle are trespassin' on the reservation an' I have my orders to move 'em off," Donald declared. "Nobody can stop me."

"No? Not even the man who give yuh them orders?" Sam demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"The Indian agent gave Fernando Velez two weeks to round up the Mercer cattle on the Bottoms," Sam said quietly. "These are Mercer's cattle an' my orders are tuh take 'em tuh the Bottoms."

"Why, you're crazy," Donald blurted. "Before yuh could possibly git 'em there yuh'd have tuh start bringin' 'em back."

"That's all right. I may not even git 'em rounded up in time tuh start movin' 'em, but I can try," Sam said crisply. "Remember, Tom Mercer has written permission to winter his cattle on the Fort Call Bottoms. By the agent's orders he still has two weeks. If he don't choose tuh take part of 'em over there till spring it's nobody's business an' that agent will find himself in plenty of hot water if he tries to break a written agreement."

"Why — why — it's plumb absurd," Donald raved.

"It may be, but it's law," Sam bluffed. "Try movin' these cattle any farther an' see how quick the agent makes you the goat tuh keep himself outa trouble."

"You say Velez gave you orders to move these cattle back toward the Bottoms — through all that snow?" an icy voice demanded. The Mormon Kid was speaking.

"He did. But he didn't say how fast," Sam came back evenly.

"Donald, I think you'd better leave things as they are until you see Mr. Sproule, the agent," the Mormon Kid advised. "I don't think it would do any harm to ask Fernando Velez if he really gave any such orders."

"That sounds like good advice an' I'll take it," Donald declared, obviously glad to have any opportunity to escape from the dilemma confronting him. In their anxiety to see and hear all that was going on, the Indians, who had taken no part in driving the cattle, had crowded all round. The party had conferred right above a high drift, and in his eagerness a young fourteen-year-old Indian buck had ridden his pony out upon the comb of the drift. When the crisis passed he started to come back, but the rotten snow suddenly caved under him, and the buck gave the wild whoop of a lost soul as he and his pony started downward.

They rolled end over end, first one on top and then the other, as the young buck failed to get one foot out of the stirrup. Had it been hard ground the fall would have killed him. As it was he was only badly shaken and scuffed up, but the mishap appealed strongly to the Indians' sense of humour. They rushed to the edge of the drift, laughing uproariously and shouting words of sarcastic advice to the youth on the best way to end his involuntary journey. The young Indian and the horse struck the bottom abruptly and after a minute or so the young buck got up with a shamefaced grin and rode his pony hurriedly out of sight, while the bucks and the breeds roared with laughter. It was a welcome anticlimax to Sam, for it relieved a dangerous strain, and gave the half-breeds an excuse to ride away as though they had forgotten all about his presence.

It was a temporary victory at least, and if played to the limit might result in saving all of Mercer's cattle. But Sam knew it was within the power of Fernando Velez to destroy his whole bluff with a word. If the man was crooked he would almost certainly deny that he had given any such orders to Sam, and in a day or so at most Donald and his gang would be back to finish the ruthless operations they had started.

It didn't make him feel any easier in his mind that Donald and the Mormon Kid were riding away side by side.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Strategy and Counter Strategy

All of the Indians with the exception of Ketchpaw and Willie Bearskin, the Indian policemen, rode back toward their camp. The big Indian looked at Sam gravely.

"You bery brave man, *hointz*. Ketchpaw much sorry you not live long."

Sam grinned.

"One thing at a time is all I can worry about, an' right now my mind is all taken up with grazin' these cattle."

" 'Fraid no can do," Ketchpaw said. "You watch-um Turk — plenty bad half-breed. Better watch-um Mo'mon Kid more as Turk."

"Thanks, I'll do my best," Sam promised. "But now I've got tuh go back an' drag them cows outa the snow where they got stuck."

The two policemen accompanied him silently and did yeoman service with their ropes. When the last animal had been relieved they rode on toward their camp.

The total loss wasn't as extensive as Sam had feared. Four cows had broken their necks, and half a dozen more were slightly crippled, but he found only one that he had to shoot. Nevertheless the rider was almost as angry as if the entire herd had been destroyed. It had all been criminal and uncalled for. Had the Mercer cattle been doing any damage or causing any loss it would have been different, but it would be a long time before the Indians brought any cattle to that part of the reservation, if they ever did, and the grass would grow up as good as though it had never been grazed. Again and again he wished that he could get to the bottom of it.

As soon as he parted with Ketchpaw and Bearskin he started down to the camp, but he hadn't gone more than a quarter of a mile before he met Bee Mercer herself, with Loren Allstead.

"Oh," the girl cried at once, "how did you ever manage it?"

"Manage what?"

"To send those Indians away," she replied. "When I saw you riding down among them I — I — just knew you'd be killed. How did you do it?"

"You saw me?"

She held up a powerful pair of binoculars.

"We stopped when we got through the narrows to take a look, and we saw them chasing the cattle over the drifts. Then we saw you riding pell-mell down that ridge on old Felix. I — I — screamed at you to stop," she smiled slightly. "I reckon you didn't hear me, because I was five miles away, but Loren did."

"That was right thoughtful of yuh tuh give me a warnin' thataway, but really, ma'am, I didn't need it. I wasn't in no danger."

"Call me Bee, as the other boys do," she said a little impatiently. "I know you were in danger. The Indians are in bad mood because of those murders, and somebody has been trying to stir up trouble. That breed, Turk Donald, has murdered two men, though he got off both times. I want to know how it happened that they didn't use violence against you."

"I just talked 'em out of it," he said. "Yuh see I had a talk with Ketchpaw

last night an' he said the agent had give Velez two weeks to move the cattle from the Bottoms. I told 'em I had orders from Velez tuh round these up and take 'em tuh the Bottoms. Yuh have got a kind of written contract about them there, ain't yuh?"

"Why, yes, of a sort," she said. "I'll tell you just what right we have. Years ago my father made a bargain with the Indians for the right to winter our cattle on the Fort Call Bottoms. There was plenty of range there then, and other stockmen urged father to get permission for them. To accommodate them he secured the right to winter twenty thousand head of cattle on the Bottoms. Other cattlemen got a right, too, you understand, but father's had priority.

"Late years the government has been buying cattle for the Indians, and so some of the white men have been stopped. That, you see, makes father's rights more and more valuable. The Rocking M, in particular, would like to buy father's priority. They need winter range badly. The right to this range here, however, is a courtesy right only. Simply because the Indians can't use it in the spring the agent has always let us turn out here until our range on the other side of the Aspen Hills was ready."

"Then the agent really has no right tuh order you to move off the bottoms," Sam said, "but he has here."

"Oh, yes. That is the weakness of our position. The agent has the authority to say when the cattle have to move off the Bottoms too, but because there's a cash consideration he has to be reasonable there. There's never been any trouble until the last two years, because the agents have all been friendly. But the last one seems to be under the influence of Pete Dargo, the boss of the Rocking M," Bee explained.

"Then that agent does have the authority to have his men run these cattle off — if it kills 'em," Sam said.

"Yes. And by stopping those breeds to-day you have saved us. If they hadn't been stopped I doubt if we could have saved an animal. The loss would have killed my father, and" — her voice broke queerly — "he's all I have in the world."

"I'm right glad if I done anything, Miss Bee, but I'm afraid it ain't all over yet," Sam worried. "Suppose Velez denies that he told me tuh round up an' bring this stuff over there tuh the Bottoms. He'd look kinda foolish if he had given them orders, but if he shouldn't back up my play them breeds'll be back here to-morrow."

"We can trust Fernando," the girl declared. "Still, they may trick him some way, and he'll have all he can do over there." She remained thoughtful for a moment, then added: "I'm going right on to the Agency myself to tell that man Sproule where he gets off if he tries any more funny business. Loren, you ride back to the ranch and tell my father that I've been called

to the Agency, but don't you dare go busting in on him like you did on me. Tell him everything is all right, and that I've just had to go to sign a few formal papers."

She started to rein her horse away, but Sam's hand fell lightly on the reins.

"You can't do that, Bee," he protested. "Goin' across there alone! Why, it's unthinkable."

She smiled at him amusedly.

"Why, I've ridden across there alone dozens of times," she said. "I'll get there well before dark and come home to-morrow. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"No?" Sam was thinking of Nip Neeves and Monk Hooten, of Turk Donald and his mangy crew, of the Mormon Kid.

"Of course not. But if you're worried I can get Willie Bearskin to go with me, and then I'll be under protection of the law. Our cook, Minnie Bearskin, is Willie's sister, you know."

"I don't like it," Sam insisted. "If you must go let me go with you."

"Positively not. You're needed here."

She was speaking now as his employer and Sam was reluctantly compelled to release her bridle reins. As she rode away he noticed that the big black horse she was riding was a superb animal and far superior to anything he had seen on the reservation. That was some relief at least.

Suddenly Bee turned and rode back.

"Here," she said, "I want to leave you these binoculars. You may need them."

No sooner was the girl out of sight than Sam took another trail that led to a place where he could see the Indian camp with the aid of the glasses. He saw the courageous girl ride in among the tents and wickups, and fifteen minutes later he watched her ride away with the young Indian policeman, Willie Bearskin. Somewhat relieved in his mind he returned to work.

It was an hour later when Sam discovered two men riding down the river from the direction of What Creek Pass. Since every man was now a possible enemy Sam trained the binoculars on them at once. To his surprise he recognized one of them as the Mound Valley cowman he had met in Bonneville, the gigantic Ray Bingham. They were riding fast.

Sam promptly clapped the spurs to his horse and dashed over to head them off. He could tell with a glance at their faces that there was something wrong.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Bingham grunted. "I thought mebbe it was one o' them Rockin' M crooks."

"How did yuh find yore range?" Sam asked. "I remember yuh tellin' me yuh had the only early range east o' the Aspen Hills."

"Yeah, I had," Bingham said with an oath. "An I'll still have it, or I'll have somebody's blood."

"But what's wrong?"

"There's cattle there," the man boomed furiously. "I wondered what them Rockin' M punchers was doin' in Bonneville. Know what they done? They trailed five hundred head o' strong cattle up there a week ago. Bought hay in Snake River an' hired Gawd only knows haw many men an' teams tuh break trail through the snow an' haul feed along for 'em. Now they got that bunch o'cattle on the big butte with a crew o' gunmen guardin' 'em."

"An' we've got no place tuh put our stuff," his companion whined.

He was a son of Elmer Bench, the man who had been murdered in the Pioneer saloon in Bonneville. "Well, we ain't licked yit," Bingham said. "We kin run our stuff in the cedars above Bonneville fer ten days or two weeks yet, an' then I'll have my range or I'll have some o' their damn hides."

"You say there is feed on that butte over there?" Sam queried.

"Hell, yes. There's grass enough that we could put our whole fifteen hundred head there right now. But that outfit says Pete Dargo give 'em orders tuh keep everything else off. But let 'em try it."

"How far is it from here?" Sam queried.

"Why, 'tain't more'n 'leven or twelve miles from here."

"An' you can't git yore cows up there fer at least two weeks?"

"We could, but what good would it do us if we couldn't get 'em on the butte?" young Bench answered. "We gotta wait now till the grass starts away from there so our stuff won't starve."

"I see. Well, it's a tough break," Sam sympathised. "If I can ever help yuh any fightin' that outfit I'll be glad tuh do it. I had another li'l run-in with two of 'em yesterday, Neeves an' Hooten. Had tuh shoot Mr. Hooten in the arm."

"So that was what happened, huh?" Bingham said with satisfaction. "We seen him on his road tuh town with his arm in a sling. But Nip Neeves is still there, with three more that we know of."

The men explained that they were returning this way because Bingham had a small bunch of cattle being fed on the lower Portage and wanted to pick them up and throw them into the main range herd. Sam invited them to stop at the camp and cook their own dinner, but informed them that he was too busy to serve as host. They accepted the invitation and Sam again headed back for the Indian camp.

The first person he saw was Ketchpaw's daughter. She smiled coyly and obviously wanted him to speak to her.

"Where's yore father, girlie?" he called pleasantly.

He observed that there were a number of Indian bucks around, but he didn't see any of the half-breeds. This was a relief.

It was some time before the coy Indian girl gained courage to answer, though she blushed and giggled. "Why you want to see him?" she asked finally, with a delicate accent on the last pronoun.

Sam grinned. The girl was pretty, and apparently he had made considerable of a hit with her. He had, however, no time for dalliance.

"It's business, little one," he replied. "I've gotta see him now."

"I get my pony — take you to him," she offered.

Sam wasn't so sure that he liked that, but evidently it would be the quickest way to find the big Indian policeman. "All right," he agreed. "Hurry!"

The girl quickly leaped on a little pinto pony bareback, and started down toward the river. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Sam Crane," he told her.

She laughed.

"That's because you have such long legs?" she queried.

"Say, yo're a purty smart kid," he grinned. "What's yore name?"

"Ida," she pouted. "My Indian name was lots prettier but they made me change it at the Agency school."

"A darn poor change, I'll say," Sam agreed.

"You come back one week, Long-legs," she said, her black eyes twinkling, "and I make you good buckskin gloves."

"Oh, don't go to any trouble," he urged.

"But I have already start 'em this morning," she said demurely.

Sam looked at her queerly, and then he was rather relieved to see Ketchpaw approaching on a different horse from the one he had ridden that morning. The big policeman grunted a command to his daughter in Shoshoni, and she loped back toward the camp. It seemed to Sam that the Indian's face was rather grim as he waited for Sam to explain himself.

"Ketchpaw," he began at once, "I've changed my mind about movin' them cattle off the reservation. I'll move 'em off to-morrow if you'll git all the Indians you can to help me. But no breeds."

"How come?" Ketchpaw demanded. "Where you take-um?"

"Through What Creek Pass. How many men can you git?"

"Mebbe-so twenty Injun. But Injun no go t'other side pass."

"All right. Right away, this afternoon, we start bunchin'. Work everything from west to east. Tomorrow we drive over pass. You savvy?"

"Me savvy," Ketchpaw nodded. "Savvy mebbe-so cattle starve — mebbe not. Stay here — Turk Don'l' kill-um sure. Me help."

Without waiting for the Indians Sam went back to the cattle, and Ketchpaw and the men he had promised arrived an hour afterward. The Indians were well mounted, and they worked willingly. By nightfall the cattle were practically in a herd, with little danger that they would scatter before morning.

Sam knew that he was taking a desperate chance in trying to move the cattle over to the butte where the feed was supposed to be good. Not only would he have to overcome the opposition of the Rocking M men there, but he might possibly incur the enmity of Ray Bingham's young partner, though he intended to move the cattle off as soon as the regular Mercer range was ready to use.

If it should turn out that the cattle could remain on the reservation without molestation, then his daring action would be doubly futile and dangerous. But he was almost certain in his own mind that Fernando Velez would have punctured his bluff before Bee Mercer could reach the Agency to undo the harm. And even if not he knew that men of the type of Turk Donald would contrive some way to bring about a huge loss. Donald and his crew, he was certain, were in the employ of the Rocking M.

"It's what I would do if the cattle were mine," he murmured to an invisible opponent. "I'll just have tuh foller my own judgment."

It wasn't long before he had an opponent who was decidedly visible and articulate, though a little incoherent.

"Have yuh gone plumb crazy or what?" young Loren Allstead demanded upon his return. "We ain't got no grass yet on our range. If yuh move these cattle off they'll die."

"You was convinced a short while ago that they'd die here," Sam reminded.

"It's different now," the puncher contended. "Yuh can't do this. Yuh got no right tuh move 'em."

"But they're bein' moved, ain't they?" Sam asked dryly.

"I'll stop it," Allstead raged. "I'll go an' see Bee."

The youth was plainly much wrought up, and for all that he was so excitable there could be no doubt of his loyalty to his employers. Sam approved of that. "Listen tuh me, Loren," Sam said earnestly. "I know I'm takin' on a lot o' responsibility. I know this whole herd may die in a snowdrift. I'm gonna do my best tuh save 'em an' yo're gonna help me. But I'll promise yuh this much. Nee Mercer an' her dad won't lose a red cent by this move. We'll stop right here and I'll prove it."

CHAPTER NINE

The Duel in What Creek Pass

CRANE felt that the greatest danger confronting him was the inevitable clash with the Rocking M punchers who held Bingham's butte. Ray Bing-

ham had failed to bluff them, and it seemed presumptuous for Sam to think that he could do it when he had far less right to the range than Bingham had. It was no more presumptuous, however, than his daring to assume so much responsibility with an outfit for which he had worked only three days.

Ever since he had conceived the move Sam had racked his brain to find some way to outwit the outlaws who would be camped there. Bingham had said there were four men there, not counting Monk Hooten, who would probably be back soon. Undoubtedly the Mormon Kid also made his headquarters there, but the chances were that he would still be on the reservation.

Something would have to be done to get the men away from their camp for a while. The best thing Sam could think of was a false message that might take them elsewhere. He resolved to try it.

That evening after supper he saddled a fresh horse, and with the explanation to Loren Allstead that he was going to look over the pass to make sure the cattle could be got through it, he rode away. Young Allstead expressed a perfectly logical opinion that he would be unable to find out much in the dark, but Sam smiled and said nothing. While pretending to write some data in his brand book Sam had written a note addressed to Nip Neeves. He had headed it as from Bonneville, and the note read:

"Monk Hooten is in jail here and he asked me to try to get word to you fellows. He's afraid they're going to try to hold him for that Bench murder. I agreed to take this note to your camp, but I don't dare let anybody know who I am, so I'm leaving this where you'll be sure to find it, but I won't wake you up. Hooten promised not to give me away. — A FRIEND."

The note, he was quite sure, would take Neeves and the rest of the Rocking M men with him to Bonneville post-haste, providing he could get close enough to their camp to leave it without himself being detected. There was little chance that they would be back in less than forty-eight hours and by that time the Mercer cattle would be located on the butte. They might leave one or two men to look after things, but if they did Sam felt that he could deal with them if he had to.

It was a little after nine o'clock when he saw the great mass of the Bingham butte looming up in the moonlight like a gigantic iceberg in the ocean. He could see at once why the snow went off from it earlier than from the surrounding country. It rose gradually from a level plain on the south and ran back to an abrupt drop on the other side. Just as on the ridges where the Mercer cattle were now the warm spring sun and the chinook winds got a full sweep at it and the snow melted and ran off rapidly. Another factor was that the bench-like top of the butte was devoid of brush so that there was nothing to hold the snow as there was in the country surrounding it. Of course there was other range inside the wide loop in the river, where the

grass hadn't started, which could be used when the high part began to dry up and sun burn.

Finding the camp in the night-time provided a problem. But Sam struck the foot of the butte and then circled it slowly toward the river. Occasionally he thought he could see little bunches of cattle but he couldn't be sure. He had passed far enough around that he could see a line of broken hills on the other side of the Blacksnake when a sudden clatter of hoofs on frozen ground gave him a start.

A minute later he saw a band of thirty or forty horses gallop to the top of a rise and stop there, snorting wildly as they gazed at him. Then, as though at a signal, they threw up their tails and galloped away. He smiled. These were broken horses — the Rockin' M cavvy. The camp couldn't be far away.

From now on the rider proceeded with the utmost caution. Presently he heard the roar of the river as it pounded its way along between high bluffs of black basalt. The ascent to the top of the butte from here was much steeper, and he found himself in a draw which ran down to the river. Here the snow wasn't all gone. It had been trampled by many horses until there was only enough left to show tracks, but enough to let Sam know he was near to the camp.

The draw widened suddenly to a little flat an acre or so in extent, and in the dryest part stood a wall tent and a chuck wagon, arranged so that ropes tied to them helped to form a corral to hold the cavvy.

Sam halted abruptly and peered around. He looked first for a night horse, and was surprised not to see any. After a few minutes he dismounted quietly and moved closer on foot. Still he could see no horse, nor did he see any saddles lying about, and when he got to the side of the tent and listened intently he could hear no breathing inside. Nobody was at the camp.

It would be perfectly easy now to leave his note, but he wondered what good it would do. If the men were merely away somewhere visiting they might be back any minute and the note might yet serve its purpose, but he formed a shrewd guess that they wouldn't be back that night. They had been left there to deal with Bingham, who had always used the butte, but Bingham had been there that morning, and they knew he had gone back home. Very likely, he thought, they had followed Monk Hooten to Bonneville to liquor up before the Mound Valley rancher came back to give them a fight.

If this was the case they might return the next day in time to cause some trouble. Sam wondered what he could do about it, and suddenly determined upon tactics which might conceivably cause him considerable grief, but which might, on the other hand, give him the upper hand with his enemies.

It was a long way to town. The Rocking M men would be hungry when they returned to their camp. If they failed to find anything to eat when

they got back they would be in a terrible temper, but they might have to return to Bonneville for food just the same. Anyway, there was no question that a state of war existed between the two outfits, and under those circumstances Sam felt that anything was justified which might help to save the Mercer cattle.

It was about two hundred yards down to the river, and Sam began to carry everything that he could lift down to the bank and dump it into the swollen stream. First he carried out everything eatable. Then he cut the ropes that formed the corral. He thought about dumping the rolls of bedding into the river also, but decided to limit himself strictly to property of the Rocking M, and not to molest the men's personal belongings. But when he had done this he got on his horse, threw his rope over the sleeping tent, and jerked it down. He dragged it down to the river and rolled it in after the grub.

To complete the job Sam fastened his rope on the end of the chuck-wagon tongue and pulled it down toward the river. He intended to stop at the bank to remove his rope and then push the wagon over, but the grade was steep, and once started the wagon couldn't be stopped. He had to spur his horse to a run to keep out of the way. Close to the bank he turned his horse, hoping to get the wagon stopped before it went over. But though it turned all right it also tipped over, and with a crash and roll shot over the bank. There was a violent tug on the saddle horn that almost toppled Sam's horse off its feet, but he released his dallies just in time and let his rope go with the wagon.

For a few minutes the puncher sat looking down into the turbid water into which the loot had disappeared. It was the first time in his life he had ever destroyed property, and his conscience wasn't altogether easy even though it had seemed to be imperative to do something of the kind. Until now he hadn't thought much about what the consequences to himself might be. Of course he knew that the Rocking M men would take the war-path, and when the Mercer cattle arrived they would be pretty certain to know who had done it, but he had intended to leave them no definite proof. He knew Loren Allstead wouldn't betray him.

Now, however, he had been compelled to leave positive evidence behind. He couldn't get down to get his rope off the wagon tongue, and he was certain that the heavy wagon would remain almost where it had fallen. His foes would see the rope, and they would find him without one. He'd have to face the music, but it couldn't be helped now.

Looking at his watch he discovered that it was nearly midnight. With a grim smile at the remnant of the cow camp he touched his horse with the spurs and rode away. The Rocking M would attempt reprisals, of course. It would be up to him to frustrate those attempts.

He was about half-way back through What Creek Pass when he saw a rider coming up the other way. He knew that the other rider had seen him at the same instant; there was no way to avoid a meeting.

Whoever it was Sam was sure that he could be upon no good business at that hour of the night, no more than Sam's recent errand had been one of peace. He was almost certain that it was a Rocking M man, and if so it would probably mean a clash. He loosened himself in the saddle and made sure that his gun was in the handiest position to reach.

Both men rode at a walk, and they were within twenty feet of each other before Sam could verify his guess that the man was the Mormon Kid. He supposed that the other had recognized him at the same time.

The Kid was on his way back to the pillaged camp. If he reached it he would certainly know who was responsible. The man was a murderer, whether he had killed Bench in the Pioneer saloon, or whether it had been Neeves or Hooten who had fired the fatal shot. Sam knew that he couldn't shoot the man down without giving him an even chance, but he hoped sincerely that the Mormon Kid would start something. Nor did he underestimate the fellow's skill with a gun. He thought that perhaps the killer was just as fast with a gun as he was, but he maintained a firm faith that it simply wasn't in the cards for him to be killed in a fair fight with the Mormon Kid.

They stopped six feet from each other as by mutual consent. Sam waited for the other to speak.

"Well, my wild riding friend, am I too late to have the honour of your company at my camp?" the Mormon Kid drawled.

"I'm afraid yuh are," Sam said. "I rode over tuh have a visit with yore outfit, but none of 'em was there. It looked like a cyclone had hit their camp."

"What's that?" the fellow hissed. "Nobody there?"

"Not a soul."

"Are you lying to me, my friend, or trying to run a bluff, like you did on those breeds this morning?" the Mormon Kid drawled dangerously.

"Be sure yuh use a question mark with words like them," Sam returned in a level voice. "I happen tuh be telling the truth. I wouldn't mind lyin' tuh you, but this time it ain't necessary."

"No? Well, I happen to know that you were not telling the truth this morning when you said Fernando Velez had told you to round up those cattle and say they were to be taken to the Bottoms. I went with Donald to see Velez and he said he had told you nothing of the kind. You may be interested to know that Agent Sproule instructed Donald to move those cattle or kill them, unless Tom Mercer makes satisfactory adjustments."

The Mormon Kid's white teeth flashed in a triumphant grin as he finished the statement.

A monumental wrath against Velez for not having backed up his play filled Sam, for all that he had already taken steps to meet that eventuality.

"Anyhow, it happens that Bee Mercer has give the order an' she is at the Agency now to put that agent right," he said quietly.

"Ah! Miss Mercer is at the Agency! Are you quite sure?" the killer said, and there was a mocking note in his voice which sent a sudden chill up Sam's spine.

"Look here, you damned coyote, if you've ——" he began.

"If I've what?" the Mormon Kid interrupted rudely. "Speak yore mine or ——"

Suddenly the killer's left hand, which Sam had been watching like a hawk, dropped toward a gun.

Two gleaming gray agents of death glinted in the moonlight as two superlative gunmen responded to the impulse to kill. But even as the guns flashed Sam felt that he had his enemy shaded, and before the Mormon Kid's gun was out of the holster the fellow screamed, "Don't shoot!"

It required only the slightest pressure of the trigger to fire Sam's gun, and the pressure had actually commenced as the Mormon Kid screamed. It was too late to check the shot, but with instinctive aversion to shooting a man begging for his life Sam tilted his gun a little and the bullet zoomed harmlessly over his foe's head.

And then with horror in his eyes Sam realised that he had been tricked. He had noticed when they first met that the Mormon Kid's right hand still had a bandage on it, and so he had concentrated upon watching the killer's other hand. Now as the streak of flame left his own gun he saw that bandaged hand coming up with a gun, and saw the malignant smile on the killer's face.

As diligently as he had practised the quick draw Sam Crane had practised a sudden sideways twist in the saddle at the instant of firing. He had done this now, and he pulled the trigger the second time just a flash behind the Mormon Kid. He felt something burn along his ribs beneath his left arm, but he also saw the Mormon Kid drop the gun in his right hand and give a savage squeal of pain.

Then up came the gun in the killer's left hand again, but for the third time Sam's forty-five bellowed, and again the Mormon Kid howled as his second gun dropped to the ground. The fellow silenced his cries almost instantly, but he shook his hands helplessly, his forearms held horizontal from the elbows. Blood streamed from both of them.

Sam could have killed the man with that last shot, but he had felt an irresistible impulse to humiliate the fellow by shooting both guns out of his hands, and he had done it. Now he was savagely, silently triumphant.

"You — you have crippled me," the Mormon Kid moaned. "Damn you,

why didn't you kill me? And I begged you not to shoot."

"Yeah, you begged me not to shoot — so yuh could git me with that other gun," Sam charged. "I'm glad, Mr. Mormon Kid, that I didn't kill yuh, though I reckon it was a duty I owed to society. Anyway, I betcha yuh won't be so frisky about startin' shootin' scrapes."

"But I'll get you, cowboy," the killer hissed. "From now on that shall be the one great purpose of my life, to get you — and one other."

"All right, hombre, but yuh'd better lemme tie up them hands o' yours so yuh won't bleed tuh death before yuh reach a doctor."

"Bah, I'd much rather die than be touched by you," the fellow screamed, and rode away, leaving his guns lying upon the ground.

Sam dismounted and picked up the two guns. Both had elaborately ornamented ivory handles. On the under side of each gun barrel he felt several slight notches. He counted them curiously. There were nine in all. Five on one gun, four on the other. He struck a match to examine them more closely, and discovered that five of the tiny notches were much older than the other four. Three of the last were filed much deeper than the fourth. That one was little more than a tiny scratch, but Sam would have taken his oath that it had been made there by a small pocket file within the last twenty-four hours.

There was no doubt in Sam's mind that each notch stood for a murdered man. Who, he wondered with a sickened spirit, had those victims been? Particularly he wondered who had been the last one. Was the Mormon Kid the murderer who had been ambushing innocent Indians lately?

He half regretted that he hadn't detained the murderer and wrung the answers out of him by force.

CHAPTER TEN

Ominous News

Sam Crane was nobody's fool, and he realised that he was sowing seeds from which he would reap an inevitable whirlwind. Already he had probably done more to the powerful Rocking M outfit than all its other enemies combined had done. He had rendered helpless their star gunman and completely defeated two others. On top of that he had taken astounding liberties with their camp. They were not likely to forget.

But no matter what happened to him Sam was willing to face the consequences if he could get the Mercer cattle in his charge to a place where they wouldn't starve to death. Once they were mixed with those of the Rocking

M on Bingham's butte he felt sure that they could n't be molested. The Rocking M would dare many things, but they would hardly dare to hold a round-up to cut out the animals branded T O M and drive them out in the snow when they had no colour of right to the land they were themselves occupying.

The immediate problem, then, was to get the cattle off the reservation before the half-breed under Turk Donald returned. He didn't doubt the Mormon Kid's word that Velez had repudiated him, and in view of the man's intimacy with the Rocking M he couldn't think that he was loyal to the Mercers. At any rate he believed the Mexican was playing the game for his own ends, and deep in his heart was a lurking fear that Bee Mercer had something to do with those ends.

Ketchpaw had promised that he and his Indians would be on hand at daybreak. Sam made sure that the Mormon Kid's bullet had made no more than a scratch along his side and rolled in to get a couple of hours' sleep before their arrival, but with the arrival of daylight there were no Indians.

While Loren Allstead was driving in the cavvy Sam cooked a hasty breakfast, and still no Indians. "They're always lazy, an' yuh can't depend on 'em," Loren said gloomily. "Reckon they'll be showin' along toward noon."

There was nothing to do about it except to saddle their horses and do what they could to get the cattle to moving. Fortunately the cattle hadn't moved much, and with an hour of hard riding they had them all in a fairly compact herd. They started to move them toward the What Creek Pass, but having no point men it was slow, tedious work; and every hour's delay meant danger because of the possible return of the Rocking M punchers.

Presently Sam sighted somebody on a little calico pony hurrying along under the brow of a ridge, apparently trying to keep out of sight of somebody above, and also trying to attract his attention. It was the same pony Ketchpaw's daughter, Ida, had ridden the day before, and he was sure it was she now.

He was in an irritated mood anyway, and he feared that the girl might be only trying to renew her attempts at coquetry, so he ignored her presence for about five minutes. But as she showed every sign of anxiety to see him he finally left the cattle and rode up to where she was. Anyhow, he thought, he might find out when the Indians would be along.

As soon as he got close enough to see her face he saw that something was the matter. She gave a frightened glance toward the top of the ridge, and said hurriedly:

"You get back to cattle quick. I slip away to see you, but Turk Donald has spies on ridge who watch you. They see me here they kill me."

"Why, what's the matter, Ida?" Sam asked anxiously. "An' where's yore father?"

"My father gone to Agency. He leave at daylight."

"But he promised ——"

"Last night bad Turk Donald and his men they come back. They tell my father they have orders from agent for him to let these cattle alone. They say agent wants to see my father. Indian people don't dare help you move cattle now — afraid they get killed."

"Well, if that ain't a break," Sam ground out bitterly.

"You watch out," the girl pleaded. "Turk Donald very bad breed. I think he kill Bearskin yesterday maybe."

"What?" Sam almost screamed.

"Donald bring Bearskin to camp last night. Say find him dead on Cougar Creek. Shot in back."

"But Bee Mercer — what about her?" Sam demanded, seizing the girl's arm. "She left your camp with Bearskin."

"I no know," the Indian girl answered. "Donald say he no see her. Just find Bearskin dead."

Desperately Sam fought to subdue the panic which threatened to prevent his usual clear thinking. If Bearskin had been murdered it meant that harm had come to Beatrice Mercer. Had she been killed too or had some other fate overtaken her? Or was it possible she had made her escape on her powerful black horse? It was this grain of hope which helped to cool his mind.

"I'm thankin' yuh, Ida, for tellin' me this," he said earnestly, "I'm thankin' yuh a heap. I wish I could do somethin' for you. Here — here's a ten-dollar bill. An' if you can find out what become of Miss Mercer I'll give you a hundred dollars more."

"You good man," the girl said, as she took the bill. "But I think somebody want to kill you too, you watch out."

"All right, I will. But you beat it now before yuh git into trouble."

Sam rode back down to the cattle, but he was up against the toughest proposition of his life. If he left the cattle he was sure they would be destroyed some way. But how was he going to stay with them when Bee Mercer might have fallen into the hands of her unscrupulous enemies?

He suddenly remembered that fresh notch on the gun he had taken away from the Mormon Kid. Had that been for Bearskin? The Kid had been with Turk Donald. They must have known about Bee starting to the Agency with Bearskin, and as they had brought Bearskin's body back with them they must have killed him and captured Bee. He couldn't find reason to hope for more. They had now murdered four Indians and one white man; there was little reason to think that they would stop at anything to gain their ends.

Again Sam Crane longed for the comforting presence of his partner. It

was a hard question to solve alone, and there was no other help. He thought of old Tom Mercer, but the old man was utterly helpless. Bee herself would wish that he be not told.

They had now got the cattle out to where the feed ended. Most of the ground was under snow. There were frequent patches where the snow was off except around the roots of the bushes, but there was no grass. Though there wasn't snow enough to really hinder the cattle from trailing, the animals seemed to sense that they were being driven away from the only available feed, and they began to mill.

At the best Sam knew that unaided it would be dark before they could get the cattle to the top of What Creek Pass. It would take another half day to drive them to Bingham's butte. Long before that the Rocking M men would be back from Bonneville. His daring scheme to move the cattle would have to be abandoned until he could get more help. At least this made it easier to make his decision. He would start out to see what had become of Bee Mercer.

He was more than a little bothered about Donald's present attitude. Yesterday the breed had been trying to take the cattle over the same trail which Sam was trying to drive them over, but instead of helping the cause along the fellow skulked at the Indian camp and had spies out to watch Sam. It led to a suspicion that the fellow had some other dark scheme in mind; a scheme, whatever it was, which had surely originated in the criminal brains of the men who controlled the big Rocking M outfit. Donald and the other breeds, he knew, were but tools.

He could no longer expect any help from the Indians. Even Ketchpaw would have to attend to his police duties, and it would be asking too much to ask him to risk his life now that his friend Bearskin had been slaughtered.

Sam had moments when he regretted that he hadn't killed the Mormon Kid; then at other times he was glad the fellow had been left alive. If anything had happened to Bee Mercer he was sure the Kid knew what it was, and if other means failed to locate her then it still might be possible to choke the truth out of the killer with his naked hands.

Riding over to Loren Allstead, Sam explained that the effort to move the cattle would have to be abandoned because the Indians had developed cold feet. He refrained from telling the youth anything about Bee for fear he would rush to Tom Mercer with the news.

"All there is to it," he said reluctantly, "is that the cattle are right in the hands of the Indian agent. No use for us to oppose him if he sends Donald out tuh move 'em again until we can get more help. So we're just gonna leave 'em where they are an' I'll go one way an' you go the other."

"Yuh mean — just leave 'em alone?" Loren asked incredulously.

"Just that. An' I believe it's the best policy. If we ain't here then the

Agent can't escape responsibility for anything that happens. But I'm goin' over tuh the Bottoms tuh see Velez. He may be able tuh send us some men."

"What about Bee?" Loren demanded.

"Oh, Bee's all right. I'll probably see her at the Agency. An' by the way, this business may delay her over there a few days, so don't be worried if she don't show up."

"What'm I tuh do?"

"Yuh remember what I told yuh, Loren, about the Mercers not losin' anything? I want yuh tuh ride down tuh Mound Valley with a note from me tuh Ray Bingham. If he asks any questions you can tell him how things stand here. I'm gonna ask him tuh help us git these cattle on his range by promisin' tuh git 'em off as soon as he gits his cows up there, an' tuh help him fight the Rocking M. If I sized him up right Bingham is a fighter an' he'll do it," Sam declared.

"I dunno," Loren said pessimistically. "He ain't had much use for us since Velez got tuh be foreman."

"I think I can fix that," Sam said. "As soon as I have a talk with Velez I'll be back."

They rode back to the camp on Trapper Creek at a fast lope, and Sam knew that Donald's spies would quickly report their retreat to their boss. He was sure that it would cause the breeds to take some action, but soon his problem was going to be to escape being ambushed or openly attacked and killed as Bearskin had been.

When he had finished writing his note to Bingham and given it to Loren he opened his war-bag and withdrew the two ornate Colt forty-fives he had captured from the Mormon Kid the night before. He had hidden them in his war-bag immediately upon his return and Loren hadn't seen them. Now the boy's eyes bulged with surprise.

"Gosh, you own plenty guns!" he exclaimed.

"These are just exhibition weapons," Sam said grimly.

"They look a lot like the guns that damn killer Mormon Kid wears," Loren remarked.

"They're the same ones," Sam said, a grim smile playing over his face. "Yuh might tell Ray Bingham I met the Kid last night an' took his guns away from him."

It was a long time before Loren could get his breath.

Meanwhile, in a dingy half-breed's cabin, Bee Mercer was fighting hard to keep from giving way to panic. Strangely enough it wasn't what might happen to her which brought her to the verge of hysteria, but what might happen to others who would surely try to rescue her when she failed to return home, and the almost sure knowledge that it would kill her father if he found out she had been abducted.

Neither was she able to shut out from her memory the horror of the moment when she had seen the young Indian, Bearskin, suddenly fall from his horse as a rifle roared from behind a tree beside the road.

She had tried to flee, but masked foes had appeared from ahead and from behind, and before she could use her six-gun a rope had pinned her arms to her sides."

"Don't worry, Miss Mercer," a hoarse voice had said to her, "you'll be released within forty-eight hours. You'll just be held till somebody comes to terms."

If the speaker had meant to soothe her he had failed entirely of his purpose.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Scheme of the Rocking M

THERE was just one thing of more immediate importance than finding out what had become of Bee Mercer, and that was to make Fernando Velez show his hand. If the Mexican foreman was hand in glove with the Rocking M outlaws, for such they indubitably were, then Sam wanted to know it. But if Velez was on the level, then his aid would be invaluable. Therefore, the Mercer camp on the Bottoms was Sam's destination. Besides, he felt that he needed the assistance of Bob Law.

Though he knew nothing of the country except what he had seen in the short time he had been riding there Sam found out from Loren that by riding down the Portage River for about four miles he could turn west and ride up a deep canyon which would put him on one of the two roads that led to the Agency. It would be nearly ten miles farther, but the spies would see him riding away with Loren and think both were going to the Mercer ranch. Then he could double back without being seen.

His private horse, a big gray ex-outlaw called Gunboat, which he had tamed, had now rested up, and Sam chose him for his mount. They rode away from the camp hurriedly, but as soon as they were sure they were out of sight of the spies watching them they slowed down. Sam, especially, had to be sparing with his mount, for he had a long, hard day ahead.

Sam reached a divide soon after noon from where he could look down upon the road which led to the Agency at Call's Fork. To get down to it he would have to buck deep snow for half a mile, and, of course, leave a plainly marked trail behind him.

He paused to look around and saw two horsemen coming down the road.

He reached for Bee's binoculars and easily identified them as two of the Indians who had helped with the cattle yesterday afternoon. Farther back he could see others, quite a large party, and they also had a light spring wagon with them. Sam decided to wait until they had passed by. When they were at the closest point below him he saw that in the wagon they were hauling the body of the young Indian policeman, Bearskin. Indian-like, they hadn't even covered the body with a blanket.

The attitude of the Indians showed plainly that they were on the alert for danger. Four murders on their reservation in the last two weeks had given them ample cause to be wary. Sam decided that it would be healthier for him to wait until they had passed by before getting to the road. But then he would have to pass them, or else loiter along the road at the slow pace they were setting. What looked to be a long canyon down which the Indians must pass was just ahead. He couldn't hope to get by them unseen until they were out of that, so he thought he might as well compose himself to wait where he was for an hour or so. He had no particular fear of trouble with the Indians, but they would be in an ugly mood and he thought it best to play safe.

Just about when he thought it would be safe to go on he suddenly saw a lone horseman coming from the other way. Again he unlimbered the binoculars, and this time a grunt of satisfaction escaped him. He put the glasses hastily back into the case, and swung onto his horse. The man coming up the road was Fernando Velex.

This was better luck than he had hoped for. Now he would have a showdown with the foreman, and it would be man to man, with no spectators. He hadn't forgotten what Bob Law had said about the man's speed with a gun, but he was as ready to try conclusions with him if need be as he had been with the Mormon Kid. On foot Sam felt that what Bob had feared might be true, but when both men were mounted Sam was confident that no man could best him in a gun duel. Especially was this true when he was riding Gunboat, a horse he had trained particularly for that very thing.

The horse could be standing perfectly still, but at a certain pressure from his rider's spurs he would spring ahead with the blind velocity of a thunderbolt, and if he was close enough to lunge against another horse it would have to be a good one indeed to keep its feet. And Sam had practised until he could shoot with accuracy and precision while the ex-outlaw horse was in the midst of his leap.

Lunging and plunging the powerful gray made its way down through the snow, but the sound of its snorts could be heard a long way in the thin mountain air, so that Sam knew Velez would have sighted him long before he reached the road. Indeed, he found Velez waiting for him when he reached the bottom of the drift, and the foreman had had time to compose

his features if they had expressed any surprise. Sam also noted that Velez's hands were folded upon the saddle horn, and there was no gun in them.

"Hello, Crane," Velez greeted. "This is certainly unexpected. Rather an abrupt way to appear, too. What's up?"

"Quite several things, Velez," Sam said as he moved his horse so that its head was toward Velez's mount's shoulder.

"The cattle — has anything happened?" Velez asked quickly.

"Things started tuh happen, but I stopped 'em for a while. I won't know what them half-breeds of Donald's will do next. But that wasn't why I wanted tuh see you."

"You were coming to see me?"

"You betcher life I was," Sam said grimly. "You met them Injuns, so you know that Bearskin was killed yesterday."

"I do. I also know more than that. I know that he was conducting Miss Mercer to the Agency at Call's Fork — and she never arrived," Velez said evenly.

"Do you know anything else about it?" Sam gritted.

The Mexican looked at him in silence for a moment.

"My friend, I can read a suspicion in your eyes that you think I have something to do with her disappearance," he said quietly. "I don't know why you should think so, but doubtless you have your reasons. Mr. Crane, I have known Bee Mercer since she was a little girl. I would give my arms, my eyes, my life to protect her."

Sam was momentarily discomfited. There was a ring of sincerity in the man's voice which carried conviction.

"I hope so, Velez," he said presently. "She's in big trouble, an' it looks tuh me like it was up to us two tuh git her out."

"I like that," Velez said eagerly. "Now please tell me what you know."

Swiftly Sam related what had happened, all the time watching like a fox the man who was supposed to be his boss. He wasn't forgetting Velez's known intimacy with the Rocking M outfit for one moment.

"So it looks," he concluded, "like this Rockin' M outfit has bribed the Agent tuh turn loose that mob of breeds to destroy all them cattle. An' tuh make sure they had an ace in the hole it looks like they'd got a hold of Bee Mercer an' are holdin' her somewhere."

"Crane, I pride myself on being a good judge of human nature," Velez declared. "I picked you for a man of courage, judgment, and determination. You have demonstrated all three qualities. Your analysis of the situation is absolutely correct."

"Yuh don't need tuh bother about flatterin' me," Sam said grimly. "What I wanta know is where you stand? The Rockin' M is back of this business, as rotten a deal o' persecution o' helpless people as I ever knew,

but I've been reliably informed that you're on mighty friendly terms with that outfit.

Now, if ever, he thought, was the time for Fernando Velez to declare himself. Sam didn't believe for a moment that the man was a coward, and if Velez had any idea of shooting it out with him now was the time. But the man's hands didn't move from the saddle horn. His expression didn't change.

"It is true that I have been on friendly terms with Pete Dargo and his men," he said. "It has been necessary. Let me tell you something. When I reached the Bottoms I found that the two men I had left there had quit their jobs. I have been unable to get a single man, Indian or otherwise, to work for me. They don't dare to. Yet those two thousand cattle must be moved to the summer range. Pete Dargo has plenty of men. He has offered to help. He may mean harm. I think he does. But is it not better to play his game and hope to outwit him in the end than it is to lose the cattle? The cattle under your charge may die, but these down here must be moved or there will be unreasonable fines imposed each day after a certain date which I know Tom Mercer cannot pay. The cattle will be sold for about the amount of the fines. There is little that I and your friend Bob and Charley Bishop can do."

Sam felt the ground being cut out from under his feet by Velez's logic. The worst of it was that the situation appeared hopeless even if Velez wasn't a traitor.

"Of course, you know better about that than I do," he said rather weakly, "but we can't let 'em git away with it. How did you find out about Bee?"

"I received a note during the night telling me that unless I agreed to certain proposals that harm would come to her. I was to make answer in twenty-four hours."

"Do I git let in on them proposals or not?" Sam demanded.

"I hadn't intended to tell you, but ——" Velez hesitated. "My friend Sam, I am minded to take you into my confidence. But I must ask your promise to keep these things to yourself until I give you leave to speak. Is it agreed?"

Sam considered the matter. There was nothing to be gained by refusal to make the promise. It might help to find out what Velez had to say.

"All right," he said finally, "I give my word."

"Thank you, my friend," Velez said heartily, "it will be a relief to share this problem. As you know it would have been only needlessly cruel to tell Tom Mercer and his daughter about it."

"I grant that."

"The Rocking M outfit," Velez began, "is owned by Eastern men. Pete Dargo is in absolute control. The owners ask nothing except profits. The

most vital thing in the cattle business in this country is the privilege of wintering cattle on the reservation. If Dargo enjoyed a monopoly on that he could double his profits and expand his outfit. The one thing that stands in the way is the priority right of Tom Mercer. Not only has Tom enjoyed the right for himself for twenty years, but the privileges for other small outfits have been issued to him year after year as a matter of convenience.

"The present agent is Dargo's tool. If Mercer could be forced out of the cattle business that agent would give Dargo priority rights over everybody else. That is the big point. There are minor considerations. One is that if the Rocking M owned the Mercer ranch with the right to turn out on the reservation in the spring where our cattle are now, it would enable them to crush all the small outfits between the Portage and the Blacksnake, and as far south as Mound Valley. In other words Dargo hopes to build up a veritable cattle empire."

"Manned by outlaws," Sam put in.

"Exactly. While Dargo hopes to make huge profits for his employers he plans to make some juicy hauls for himself and his crew by straight out theft," Velez acknowledged.

"And in a nutshell they ask you tuh let 'em go ahead an' break Tom Mercer," Sam said.

"Yes — and by actively helping them to steal the cattle in my charge."

"I'm tuh understand then that Mercer was shot as a part of their campaign."

"I — I'm afraid so." Velez seemed to wince.

"Just how do they propose tuh work that theft?" Sam asked.

"Right now the proposal is to let them trail our cattle up from the Bottoms. Something will happen to them and they will not arrive."

"But why should they try tuh starve these other cows?" Sam wanted to know.

"Because I at first turned their proposition down. If they can destroy these, or even draw me away from the others long enough, then they will succeed anyway," Velez said quietly.

"Say, Bob Law is down there, an' if what you say is true he's in a lot of danger now," Sam cried apprehensively.

"I warned him to use the utmost vigilance — warned him that his life was in danger," Velez said coolly.

"By the Almighty I'm startin' on the war-path, an' I won't stop till I've killed enough of 'em tuh throw the fear o' God into the hearts of the rest," Sam gritted through set, clinched teeth.

"Be careful," Velez smiled grimly. "Too much activity on our part may mean great harm to Miss Mercer."

"Oh God," Sam moaned helplessly. Suddenly he straightened in his

saddle. "Look here, Velez, I know at least two men who know where Bee is. I'm gonna have the truth outa one or the other. One is Turk Donald, the other is the Mormon Kid." Again he caught that involuntary wince upon Velez's handsome face.

"My friend, be very careful," Velez warned. "You will never find Donald except when surrounded by his men. And the Mormon Kid — he is deadly."

"Deadly, is he?" Sam smiled grimly.

He twisted around and untied one end of the slicker behind the cantle of his saddle. From the slicker he brought forth the Mormon Kid's guns.

"You recognise these?" he asked.

The dark face of the Mexican grew several shades lighter. "You — you killed him?" he asked almost in a whisper.

"No. We had a little gun battle an' I shot both guns out of his hands. I imagine he's under a doctor's care in Bonneville now."

"I am sorry you shot him," Velez said. "I am afraid we will never find out what we want to know from him now."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam Is Beaten on the Draw

Fernando Velez was as puzzling to Sam as he had always been, despite his apparently candid statement about range affairs. If Velez was telling the truth then he certainly deserved much credit for making an almost single-handed fight against the powerful Rocking M outfit. On the other hand the man was obviously displeased because Sam had shot the Mormon Kid, and this aroused all the puncher's latent suspicions.

"Look here, Velez," Sam said suddenly, "if you've been spikin' their game so long how comes it they don't try tuh bump you off like they did Mercer?"

Though the question could have easily been considered insulting, and it certainly carried scepticism as to his honour, Velez smiled.

"It is the one thing they dare not do. There are two reasons. One I shall show you."

"Yeah?" Sam said sceptically.

"Yes. I have rather too much speed with a revolver. Will you kindly lean over and remove my gun, and replace it with one of the Mormon Kid's empty ones?"

"What's the idea?" Sam queried.

"I know that you are rather fast, my friend. To beat the Mormon Kid you had to be. We will sit here with our hands on the saddle horn. At a signal I will draw the empty gun, you your loaded one. I trust you not to pull the trigger, but I think I can demonstrate that I am a bit faster on the draw."

"All right, I'll play with yuh," Sam said grimly, "but I won't bother about givin' you an empty gun."

Velez bowed his acknowledgments.

"Very good. But to prevent accidents suppose that instead of drawing upon each other we see which one can move that small white stone yonder?"

"Right," Sam agreed. The stone wasn't above three inches in diameter, and it was about twenty feet distant.

Both turned their horses facing it. "You give the word," Velez offered.

With all the will power at his command Sam concentrated upon the business of showing this Mexican up. Their horses stood so that the riders could watch each other. Neither looked toward the stone, but at each other. It suddenly flashed into Sam's mind that Velez might simply be tricking him into firing at the stone, so that he could be killed without difficulty. Yet Velez had offered to try to display his skill with an empty gun. He determined to keep his eye upon the man till the last instant, but to give every effort to beating him in the proposed exhibition.

Velez kept his hand folded negligently upon the saddle horn, and a bit of a smile played around his mouth.

"Any time," he said.

"Draw!" Sam snapped, and his own long, flexible fingers dropped to his gun handle with the flowing smoothness of natural skill and much practice. He knew that he could draw and flip the muzzle of the gun upward without taking his eye off his competitor.

Apparently something was wrong with his eye. He knew Velez had moved, but it had been with the skill of a sleight-of-hand performer. A gun roared, and just as Sam pulled the trigger the white pebble hopped away like a toad. Sam's bullet buried itself in the ground where the stone had laid.

Fernando Velez dropped his smoking gun back into the holster.

"You are fast, my friend," he said. "About the fastest man I have ever competed against."

"Yuh shaded me — plenty," Sam acknowledged. "I don't mind sayin' that it's never been done before."

"You and me, Sam, I think could make a pretty good fight of it if we were attacked at close quarters. It's not unlikely that that may happen," Velez said in a quiet voice, but with a deep undercurrent of feeling which produced a marked effect upon Sam Crane.

If, Sam thought, he could be sure that Velez was loyal to the Mercers,

then the fight wasn't so hopeless after all. They two, with Bob Law, would be capable of at least thinning the ranks of the Rocking M outfit. And right now Sam was minded to trust the man.

"You said there was another reason," Sam reminded.

"Oh yes. There is another reason, and I am sorry that I cannot tell you what it is. It is precarious in a way, because if a certain man dies that reason automatically vanishes, and then I must depend altogether upon my gun."

"It's somethin' tuh lean on," Sam admitted without rancour. He could admire skill whenever he saw it, and Velez surely had that quality.

"But now," Velez said, "we must decide what to do. First, we have to consider Miss Mercer. This reservation is a big place. I am certain that she is being guarded by some of these half-breeds' wives. I'm sure she won't be mistreated, but it would be the biggest sort of accident if a search happened to find her. Her captors are too clever. Even if we found out where she is we would have to proceed very carefully to keep her from being harmed. If, in the end, we should keep the outlaws from getting what they want they will demand freedom from prosecution as the price of her surrender. We must act very carefully."

Sam Crane was silent. He was ready to fight anything or anybody now that the despicable methods of the Rocking M crowd were fully known to him, but he could see no place to attack. The big outfit had had all the advantages before, but getting possession of Bee Mercer was a master stroke. Anything that might be done now to defeat their purpose might only put the girl in still more danger.

"I like the way you planned to move the cattle over there on to Bingham's butte," Velez went on presently. "Had it not been for this other occurrence I'm sure it would have given us a big advantage there. You could have held those cattle in safety, and I could have got the others up to the range some way. But now we haven't got the men to move them against their will. If Donald meets too much opposition the man is just savage enough to revenge himself upon Bee."

That the Mexican's anxiety for the girl was sincere could not be doubted, but always there was that lingering suspicion in Sam's mind that the man might be willing to do many peculiar things to win her himself. Sam tried hard to get such thoughts out of his mind, but they lingered with the tenacity of a perennial weed.

"It seems tuh me," Sam finally declared, "that we've gotta take the chance o' movin' 'em over any way. We can trust Bob Law tuh tend tuh things down there. If Bingham does agree tuh help, you an' me an' him can darn near move 'em."

"Meantime the Agent will be putting fines on the others, and Miss Mercer's dangers will be increased," Velez pointed out.

"What the hell do *you* suggest?" Sam demanded in irritation. "Just surrender an' let 'em git away with it?"

"If it should be the only way to save Miss Mercer's life — yes," Velez said coolly.

"I guess yo're right," Sam conceded. "But I'm tellin' yuh this: I'm not leavin' this country now till I go tuh the mat with that outfit. I've wounded a couple of 'em, but from here in when I mix with 'em I shoot tuh kill."

"You — are determined upon that?"

"Absolutely."

"Then perhaps we may accomplish something yet," the foreman said softly. "I have a plan. But a very important thing is that you trust me implicitly."

"Well, I'd like tuh hear the plan," Sam countered.

"They gave me twenty-four hours to agree to their demands. If I don't do it I know that they will take steps to show me that they mean business. I don't think it will be to harm Miss Mercer. More likely they will slaughter some cattle. As I see it I must yield to their demands at once. I will go back to the Bottoms, pretend to get sick or something, and let them steal those cattle."

"Go on," Sam said grimly.

"I will, of course, insist upon Miss Mercer being returned to her home. I'll also contrive to see what happens to the cattle that they may eventually be recovered."

"An' what do I do?" Sam wanted to know.

"I'm almost certain that they will insist upon me discharging you," Velez smiled. "You will then be a free agent, and if you feel impelled, through motives of revenge or otherwise, to try to stop the proposed steal you may possibly accomplish something."

"Velez," Sam said soberly, "you may have yore own irons in the fire. Yuh may have discovered that I ain't a safe man tuh have around, an' yuh may figger this a way tuh git rid o' me. But I'm gonna assume that yo're on the level in this, an' if yuh are, by the powers, we'll beat that outfit yet. I'll play yore game."

"Good! And now you must trust me as I said. If I appear to surrender to them there must be no reservations to arouse suspicions. I will pretend to help them in every way possible. You will doubtless be sorely tempted sometimes to think that I am actually trying to plunder my employer, but you must play the game."

"All right," Sam promised. "But I will say this: If it should turn out that this scheme is only a trick, then remember that I'll be gunnin' for yuh in spite o' the fact that you're a faster gunman than I am."

"You are a courageous man, Sam Crane, and I admire you. But I am

sorry that I cannot have your complete trust. You see, if Miss Mercer and her father ever find out what I have agreed to, and we don't save their cattle, they will think that I am a contemptible renegade. I like them very much. It would hurt me to have them think I had been disloyal."

There was an undertone of sadness in the man's liquid tones which caused Sam to say:

"If you do yore part I'll promise never to tell 'em about this deal even if we lose out; that is unless I do find positive evidence that you're really in with the Rockin' M."

"Thanks. And now, since it will be demanded anyway, I think you had as well consider yourself fired," Velez said. "But for the time being you must be the villain. When Bee returns she must think that you have quit your job."

"Lucky I got my own horse under me — I won't have tuh go back tuh camp," Sam said.

"And since you are already on this side I think it would be wise for you to go on and see your partner, Bob," Velez suggested. "You can tell him about our agreement, and as you have been fired he will probably quit. It will be too dangerous for him to remain after the Rocking M take charge. Probably you won't mind taking a request from me to Charley Bishop that he come back over the mountains to take your place."

"Of course," Sam agreed. "Undoubtedly both boys would be murdered if they stuck there." At the same time he was thinking that their removal would withdraw the last obstacle in the way of the outlaws if Velez should turn out to be crooked after all.

"Well, good luck, my friend," Velez said. "I have but one more request. Would you mind giving me the guns you took from the Mormon Kid?"

The guns were of no use to Sam, and he couldn't see where they would have any particular value as evidence. He passed them over, though wondering what Velez wanted with them.

As Sam rode away one question pounded incessantly at his brain: Had he made a courageous ally, or had he been cleverly duped?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An Attempt at Bribery

Fernando Velez had told Sam how to reach the Mercer cow camp on the Bottoms without coming in contact with any Indians, unless he happened to meet some riding the range, and as the country was nearly all level

after he got out of the next big canyon he could avoid those.

He soon left the snow line behind, and when he reached the edge of the so-called Bottoms late in the day he was amazed at the amount of grass that covered the great natural meadows. Assuredly here was a paradise of a winter range for cattle. The Indians, he had been told, hadn't stock enough to use a quarter of it, so it certainly was a prize well worth owning by any cow outfit. He had a better conception of why the Rocking M, or rather Pete Dargo, its manager, was willing to resort to anything to get the inside track of this fine winter pasture.

At first he could see no cattle in sight, but this was because he had struck the Bottoms at a point farthest from the river. He understood that no cattle could be trailed back through the centre of the reservation for various reasons, among which the most compelling was that the agent arbitrarily refused to permit it. Consequently, the cattle had had to be worked to the farther edge of the Bottoms, formed into trail herds there, and then moved upward to near the mouth of the Blacksnake River, which stream had to be forded, and then driven to the summer range by way of a flat plain known as Paradise Plateau. They were already being moved toward the river.

He had been told that straight across the distance was not more than forty miles, but around the trail it was a hundred and twenty. A lot of devilry could take place on that trail, he knew.

It would be long after dark before he reached Velez's camp, and being in a strange country he faced the possibility of spending the night out on the flats. But as the evening began to grow old he was cheered by the sight of a camp-fire, which proved to be the one he was seeking.

Nine men were hunkered around the fire, though they were about to roll in when Sam arrived. The moment he shouted a greeting, Bob Law rushed out to meet him.

"Sam! What the deuce you doin' *here*?" Bob wanted to know.

"It's a long story, mates," Sam said, forcing a grin as he dismounted in the circle of firelight. "Am I too late tuh git any chuck? I ain't eat since daylight this mornin'."

"We'll fix that," Bob said. "But what ——"

"Lemme turn my horse out first," Sam urged. "Gunboat ain't covered as many miles as I have to-day, but he's been tryin' tuh shake this saddle off ever since we seen yore fire."

He had been sizing the men up intently without appearing to do so. There were two Indians, apparently "reps" for the Indian cattle boss, and five white punchers whose hard looks stamped them at once as the type to be working for the Rocking M. The other two, of course, were Bob Law and Charley Bishop.

Charley Bishop was already stirring up the fire to cook Sam's supper, and when the horse was unsaddled Bob advised Sam to lead Gunboat out toward the cavvy so that he wouldn't become lost. In a few minutes the two friends were swallowed up in the darkness.

"What's up, Sam?" Bob demanded.

"Fired," Sam said laconically, "an' I want you tuh rare up on yore dignity an' quit, too."

"Ain't a damn bit sorry," Bob said promptly. "All me an' Charley have been is chore boys for these Rockin' M hombres, an' I'm tellin' yuh I ain't ever seen nobody I like less. But how come that damned Fernando fired yuh. Don't he know a good man when he sees one?"

"How do yuh like him?" Sam queried.

"Never seen a better cattleman, but he's too damn thick with the Rockin' M. Him an' that fat slob that runs the Rockin' M are thick as thieves."

"That mebbe ain't as strange as it looks, since they're all set tuh steal every T O M there is on the Bottoms."

"What?"

"Can't explain everything now. We don't wanta stay away long enough to arouse them jay-birds' suspicions, but that's the Rockin' M game. Velez is only pretendin' tuh play with 'em. That's why he's fired us, but, Robert, you an' me is gonna block that steal or lose our socks."

"I'm game," Bob said promptly. "I'll foller yore lead."

"I knew yuh would," Sam said gratefully. "Now let's turn Gunboat loose an' go back. We'll have time tuh talk to-morrow where we won't be noticed."

They returned to the camp, where Bob casually informed Charley Bishop that he had quit riding for Velez and that the foreman had requested him to return to the Portage the next day.

"Aw, what the hell?" Charley growled.

"Why, don't yuh wanta go back there?" Sam queried, surprised.

"Yeah, I'd ruther ride there than here, but I think it's a damn dirty trick for yuh tuh quit Tom Mercer right when he needs help so cussed bad," the puncher said candidly.

"We ain't mortgaged to 'em," Sam sneered.

"Yuh mean Bob is quittin', too?" Charley demanded disgustedly.

"If I kin persuade him to," Sam said with a covert glance at Bob. "I'm sure I know where there's a heap better range than this. Better change yore mind, Bobby, an' come along," he finished.

"I dunno," Bob murmured. "If you go I reckon I'll have to, but I kinda got an idee this would be a purty good layout in the summer time."

They continued to argue the matter back and forth until they went to

bed, with Bob promising to make his decision in the morning. Charley Bishop was disgusted and indignant, but the two friends were sure that the Rocking M men had been completely fooled, and would think they had seen the last of them when they left camp together the next morning.

In the morning Charley Bishop left the camp as soon as he had breakfast. One of the Rocking M also took his departure in another direction, while the other four loafed about camp with the obvious intention of waiting until Sam and Bob left. The two Indian riders kept to themselves, waiting philosophically for whatever might occur.

After stalling for half an hour while Bob packed his war-bag the two friends mounted their horses.

"Tell Velez when he comes back tuh hold my cheque till I write him," Bob told one of the punchers, a fellow named Purd Holt.

"Ain't stickin' around here then?" the man queried.

"If we do it won't be punchin' cows fer no fifty dollars a month," Bob replied enigmatically.

They turned their horses' heads toward the Agency at Call's Fork, Sam having an uncontrollable desire to see the crooked agent who had betrayed the Mercers, and probably was betraying his charges. He felt that he might in time have to have dealings with the fellow. When they reached the agent's office they met not only him, but Pete Dargo, the manager of the Rocking M outfit, as well.

Dargo, a man of sixty, was enormously fat. At first glance one wouldn't suppose that he could climb onto a horse unaided, let alone ride one all day, but Bob assured Sam that he had seen the man ride, and that if Dargo could get a horse capable of carrying his bulk the fellow could ride all day.

Also at first glance Sam received the impression of good nature usually associated with fat men. The man's fat jowls quivered like jelly every time he laughed, which was often; but one look into the hard black beads which were his eyes, peering from between red, granulated lids dispelled that impression, and one saw a soul as hard as flint and as grasping as an octopus.

During their ride in Sam had let Bob into all the information he possessed, and learned what little Bob had gleaned about the condition of affairs. Bob was eager to help, but to Sam's surprise had no faith whatever in Fernando Velez's integrity.

"I tell yuh he don't act like a man who was in a pickle down here," Bob declared. "This whole outfit, Dargo included, are afraid of him. He talks like he was one o' them old Spanish dons an' damn if they don't treat him as such."

"You may be right, but again he may have something on 'em," Sam said. "Anyhow, we've gotta string with him till we know he's double-crossin' us."

It was Bob who nudged Sam and whispered Dargo's name when they approached Agent Sproule's office and saw the oily, well-dressed official chatting amicably with the fat man.

At their approach the smile fleeted from Sproule's face and he greeted them with a cold stare.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he demanded.

"Heard yuh was lookin' fer a coupla good gunmen an' wanted tuh apply for the job," Sam said bluntly.

"You heard what? Are you crazy?" the agent demanded.

"We heard a certain cow outfit was givin' yuh trouble 'bout movin' off, an' that all yuh had was a crew o' cowardly half-breeds tuh fight 'em with. We just thought we'd offer yuh the services of a pair o' real men."

"Look here. Where did you hear any such ridiculous stuff as that?" Sproule demanded angrily.

"Why, I didn't know it was any secret about you figgerin' tuh help the Rockin' M outfit tuh break old man Tom Mercer so the Rockin' M would have the inside track on the reservation range," Sam said with pretended innocence.

"You are crazy," Sproule snarled. "Now get out of my office before I summon the Indian police."

"One minute, Sproule. Let me talk to 'em," Pete Dargo interfered. "You boys know so much mebbe I'd better attach yuh tuh the Rockin' M. I can generally use another good man or two."

"An' especially now that the Mormon Kid has been dehorned," Sam said.

"What's that you say?" Dargo rasped. "Where is the Kid?"

"I reckon he's in the hospital now," Sam said mildly. "Yuh see I wanted tuh demonstrate my ability before I asked fer a job so I shot both his guns outa his hands an' sent him down the road talkin' tuh himself. Don't yuh think yuh could use us?"

Pete Dargo looked at him contemplatively and finally jabbed a big cigar between his lips.

"Anybody that can do that — if he can — is purty reasonable good."

"I think so," Sam said modestly. "I had his guns, but I give 'em away. It might interest you, Mr. Sproule, that he'd just filed a new notch in one o' them guns. It was fer that young Injun policeman, Bearskin, I reckon."

The agent's smooth face had become white as chalk. He looked at his companion helplessly.

"You know a lot, son," Pete Dargo said as he lighted his cigar. "Sometimes people know too much — for their own good. But why did you boys quit Velez?"

"He fired me, an' Bob quit."

"I see. An' bein' bright boys an' havin' found out what yuh was fired for,

yuh sort o' figger tuh git paid big fer what yuh know by blackmailin' Mr. Sproule. Right, ain't I?"

"They'll not get a cent from me," Sproule mouthed. "The Injun police ——"

"Come back here thirty days from to-day and Sproul will pay you one thousand dollars each," Dargo interrupted without blinking an eye.

"Not bad pay," Sam murmured.

"And if yuh do show up an' git the money yuh'll find a job waitin' for yuh with the Rockin' M," Dargo said sardonically.

"Thirty days," Sam remarked quizzically. "A lot can sometimes happen in thirty days, can't it?"

He winked at Bob and they went out.

Sproule leaped to his feet uncertainly, but Pete Dargo chuckled and bade him sit down.

Around the Agency were a number of silent Indians. The recent killings on the reservation had brought them to a state of mind which wasn't exactly healthy.

"Sproule," Sam Crane remarked, "is just a dirty, cowardly crook. But it's easy tuh see how old Pete Dargo come tuh be manager o' the Rockin' M. I wonder just how far into that fat carcass a forty-five slug would reach?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marked Men

THE Fort Call Indian Reservation was no place for the two cowpunchers to linger, despite the bribe that had been offered them by Pete Dargo. If they kept their mouths shut and made no trouble they rather believed that Dargo would keep his word, pay them what had been promised and put them on his pay-roll. Their silence would be criminal and he would know he could use them.

On the other hand, at the first sign that they might cause trouble, Dargo would surely put his killers on their trail, and no doubt there were already a number of them anxious to do the job at the first opportunity. They knew that the badly scared Sproule would have them ambushed by his crew of breeds if he could.

Sam Crane, naturally, was most concerned to know whether Velez had secured the freedom of Bee Mercer. It would be too dangerous for them to ride back across the reservation, and it might even jeopardise the girl's safety. Sam decided that he must bear his anxiety as best he might and con-

centrate upon the problem of outwitting the Rocking M.

If the main herd of cattle were to be stolen some place between the Bottoms and the summer range through the connivance of Fernando Velez, then there would be no use for the outlaws to try to injure the herd on the other side of the reservation. It seem, therefore, that it was up to the boys to concentrate upon the main herd, and leave the other to the care of Charley Bishop and Loren Allstead.

Some thirty or forty hard-bitten gunmen would concentrate upon the business of keeping them away from that herd, and this offered them their problem.

It was about twenty miles to Portage City, which was south of Call's Fork. The cattle trail ran northeast. Sam rather wanted to ride over the trail, but he was certain that they would be watched for a while at least. By going to Portage City first they might be able to double back unseen. Or they might ride on for another hundred miles and reach Bonneville from the side they had first entered it.

They paused to purchase some supplies, including a lariat for Sam, to replace the one he had lost, from the government store before leaving the Agency, and they encountered Ketchpaw as they were coming out. The big Indian policeman acknowledged their greeting with a surly grunt. Bob Law flushed angrily, but Sam thought he saw a warning in the Indian's eye. Ketchpaw couldn't afford to let the Agency officials see that he was on friendly terms with two white men who were *persona non grata.*

"Ketchpaw," Sam whispered as they passed, "you come to Portage City to-night. Be at livery stable. Mebbe I tell what you wanta know."

The big Indian grunted again and passed on. Whether it was a promise or not, Sam didn't know.

Yet as the boys were returning to the livery stable that night at about nine o'clock — they had made arrangements to sleep in the loft — they saw the big policeman standing at the front of the barn with his arms folded across his breast.

"Come inside," Sam whispered.

They climbed up into the darkened loft and dropped upon the boys' blankets.

"Ketchpaw," Sam said, "would you like to know who killed your friend, Bearskin?"

"Some tam Ketchpaw fin' out. Then chut-um — chut-um!" the big Indian growled gutturally.

"I'd be careful about that," Sam advised. "I'm going to tell you who it was, or who I think it was. An' not only did he kill Bearskin, but I'm sure he killed all the other Indians."

"Who kill-um?" the big policeman demanded tensely.

"It was the man they call the Mormon Kid," Sam said. "He has cut four fresh notches on his gun this spring."

"Me kill-um!" Ketchpaw grunted savagely.

"But not yet a while," Sam said. "You see I wounded him, and he's in the hospital in Bonneville. It won't do for you to go off the reservation after him. Yore star would be no good there an' you'd be hung for murder. But if he ever comes back on the reservation then you'll have the right to arrest him."

"Um!" the Indian grunted. They knew he would never bother to arrest the Mormon Kid if he found him on the reservation.

"I've told you this because I know if he comes back some more of yore people may be killed by him," Sam said. "Now I'd like a favour from you."

"You ask — Ketchpaw give-um."

"I want you to watch the Mercer cattle as long as they're on the Bottoms, or have somebody do it. Find out if anything is done to 'em."

"I watch," the policeman promised. "Now I go."

As Ketchpaw started to get up they heard the stairway that led to the loft creak, and then somebody stepped upon the floor below them. With a bound Sam was on his feet and leaping to the stairway. When he got to the bottom he was just in time to see a man fling himself upon a horse and disappear down a side street.

"Who was that just left here?" he demanded of a hostler who came up just then.

"It was one o' the riders of the Rockin' M outfit from the Bottoms," the fellow said.

"A damned spy," Sam gritted to Bob and the Indian when they came down. "I reckon after this, Ketchpaw, yuh'd better keep away from that outfit."

"Me see," the Indian grunted, and strode away.

"Anyhow," Sam said laconically, "it won't be healthy for the Mormon Kid tuh show up on the reservation again."

"And it'll let Pete Dargo know that we're out tuh spike his game," Bob added. "We'll be marked men."

Now that Pete Dargo would soon know that they didn't intend to remain inactive and wait for their bribe money Bob's statement was certainly correct. Especially would they be in danger if they approached the Mercer cattle on the Bottoms, or even rode along the trail. Sam's original plan to keep close enough to the cattle to at least have some contact with Velez would have to be changed.

"What we'll do," Sam said, "is tuh go back there an' try tuh join up with Ray Bingham. We'll find out if Bee Mercer has got home, an' that'll give us a free hand tuh do whatever we can."

They couldn't return to the Mercer ranch, for they were supposed to have quit working for them. It would take them nearly two days to get back there unless they crossed the reservation and before that Charley Bishop would have told the Mercers that they had abandoned the outfit. Sam had given his word to Fernando Velez not to tell of his pretended crookedness, so they were stopped from making a defence.

Therefore, two days after leaving Portage City they rode their mounts into the town of Bonneville for the second time. They took their horses to the livery stable and proceeded at once to Hubert Fox's store.

The merchant was amazed to see them.

"Ever since I heard that you went to work for Tom Mercer, I've expected to hear of you being killed," he said.

"We're still right side up," Sam laughed. "By the way, is the Mormon Kid in town?"

"Yes. He came in with a bullet wound in both hands. Was in kinda bad shape from loss o' blood."

"He didn't claim it was rope burns then, this time."

"I ain't heard that he said how it happened, but Monk Hooten, who is here with him, got drunk an' said the same man got 'em both. He said the man was slated to die, and intimated that it wouldn't be an easy death either. Say, you don't happen to be the man?"

"It was me," Sam admitted.

"Then for goodness' sake get out of town. Yo're in more danger than you think. Nip Neeves has been down here and he claims that all the stealing that's been done has been by a gang which included you two. He says not only Mercers, but the Rocking M has been losing cattle. People are afraid not to believe the Rocking M bunch. They claim the Mormon Kid and Hooten were shot by rustlers. Don't you see if you stay here you'll be arrested, and then the Rocking M bunch will come in and lynch you?"

"So that's the little game they're playin', is it?" Sam said grimly. "I hope the local officers don't try to arrest us — for their own sakes."

"But yuh don't realise how scared people are here of the Rockin' M," Fox protested. "They know all of Dargo's crew will soon be around here, an' they'd burn the town down if they took the notion."

"Do you know anything about Ray Bingham's movements?" Sam asked.

"His cattle are in the cedars right close tuh town, but I don't know whether Ray is there or not."

"You haven't heard any news of the Mercers lately?"

"Not a thing," Fox said.

They had got all the information they could from him, and they went out.

"Think there's any danger of us bein' arrested?" Bob inquired.

"They'll arrest us if they can, an' it'll probably mean a lynchin' if they

do," Sam said. "We'd better find Bingham if we can. We don't wanta shoot up anybody here, but we can't let 'em turn us over tuh the Mormon Kid."

"Yuh'd orta killed that bird," Bob growled.

"Speak o' the devil," Sam murmured softly.

Coming along the boardwalk a few rods away was the Mormon Kid. Both hands were swaddled in bandages, and of course he wore no guns. The man with him was Joel Skinner, the town marshal of Bonneville.

Calmly ignoring them the boys started to walk away.

"Hold on there, you," Marshal Skinner shouted shrilly. "I wanta put you under arrest."

Despite the authority of his tone he seemed in no haste to lay violent hands upon them himself. He showed an inclination to stay behind his companion, and the long chin whiskers he affected waggled like he had St. Vitus dance in the chin.

Sam and Bob stopped and waited for the marshal and the Mormon Kid to come up to them.

"Did I hear you say somethin' about a rest?" Sam queried of the marshal.

"You'll get a rest, my friend, and a long one," the Mormon Kid gibed. "You don't know just how long it's going to be."

"Pass over them guns," Skinner ordered.

"And if we don't — then what?" Sam asked.

"Yuh can't monkey with the law," the marshal declared, with an appealing glance at the killer.

"You tried to murder me," the Mormon Kid said vengefully. "Now you will surrender to the law — or take the consequences. You are covered at this minute by three men. You are fast with a gun, I admit, but you will die the instant either of you reach for a weapon." A cruel, sardonic smile was upon his thin lips.

"I don't believe he's bluffin'," Sam said. "They musta seen us go into that store."

"You can be sure I'm not bluffing," the Kid said. "If you look carefully you will see one man just behind that picket fence. Another stands at the corner of that building, and the third is stationed in an upstairs window across the street with a rifle. You walked into something, my friends."

The two punchers looked toward the places indicated, and the men were indeed there. Each man held a gun ready for action. The Mormon Kid had certainly acted with promptness.

"All right," Sam sighed. "It looks like they had us, Bob."

"Pass over them guns," Skinner repeated.

"Wait!" the Mormon Kid snapped. "They're rather clever with those guns. Make them raise their hands while you get them yourself."

Covered as they were there was nothing for the boys to do except to comply. Sam raised his hands and the marshal came forward to take the gun. Had he been alone Sam would have clinched with the man and taken the chance of shielding himself while he got his gun into action, but he feared that it would only get Bob killed. He had to stand still while his gun was taken, and then Bob was disarmed.

"Now git agoin' ter thet there jail," the marshal shrilled. "An' no funny business."

"And you'd better not let them escape if you know what's good for you," the Mormon Kid said coldly to Marshal Skinner.

"You bet they won't escape," Skinner promised.

He jabbed his gun into the small of Sam's back and commanded them to march. The Mormon Kid and two of the three gunmen accompanied them to the jail to make sure that they made no break for liberty.

They were locked into separate though adjoining cells in the dingy jail, and temporarily left to their own devices.

"Well, we walked into that one like a pair o' mullet-headed fools," Sam said disgustedly.

"Accusin' us o' being the rustlers — that shore does burn me up," Bob said hotly.

"An' it'll likely string us up," Sam said grimly. "But I'm not gonna spend my time thinkin' up last words. I figger we've still got one card to play."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Marshal Skinner Gets a Surprise

THE two cowboys were left alone in the jail for more than an hour, and they had time to digest the incredible fact that their enemies had had the effrontery to accuse them of being rustlers.

Sam realised that with justice a charge might have been laid against him for raiding the Rocking M camp, or even for shooting the Mormon Kid through the hands. But neither of those charges would justify the Rocking M in mobbing them. A charge of rustling would. Fox had been right. At the moment their greatest hope was that there wouldn't be enough Rocking M men in Bonneville for them to carry out their plan immediately. A day's respite might mean much.

Nevertheless, they went ahead with their plan to gain their liberty at once, slim though they knew it to be.

"Here comes Skinner," Sam suddenly whispered to Bob. "If he don't

listen to reason be on the alert tuh grab them long whiskers o' his if he sticks 'em close tuh the bars. An' yank 'em out if he don't turn over the keys."

He had time to say no more, for Skinner was coming importantly along the corridor.

"Hain't got no reg-lar cook in this jail," he said, "so I have tuh bring yore meals in from the restaurant. Wha' d'ye wanta eat fer supper?"

"The condemned men ate a hearty last meal, eh, marshal?" Sam said.

"Whatta yuh drivin' at?" Skinner demanded.

"Don't pertend tuh be any dumber than yuh are, Skinner," Sam said crisply. "We're wise tuh yore little game o' léttin' the Rockin' M bunch mob us to-night."

"Why, yo're crazy. I'm marshal here, an' if they attempt ——"

"They will attempt it, an' you know it," Sam cut in. "But first we wanta warn yuh just what yo're lettin' yoreself in for. Mebbe we're just two helpless waddies who'll soon be dead an' forgotten, an' mebbe we have friends who'll just naturally have yore scalp if anything happens to us. I wouldn't be too quick about sellin' myself tuh the Rockin' M if I was you."

"Whatta yuh mean?" Skinner stormed, but with a hint of apprehension.

"Now about this rustlin'. We happen tuh be packin' plenty o' references that'll show yuh we ain't that kind. An' we can mighty quick convince anybody that we wasn't in the country. Look these over. The first one is from the governor of our native State — a personal friend of ours."

Sam stuck a paper through between the bars and the marshal took it with some hesitation. A look of doubt overspread the official's face as he read it.

"This says yo're well known to him, that yore characters are good an' that you've done good service breakin' up outlaw gangs while servin' as deputy sheriffs," Skinner said blankly. "But how do I know it's genuwine?" he snarled after he had recovered a bit from his surprise.

"Wire him an' find out," Sam advised. "But we've got more for yuh tuh read. If anything happens tuh us you'll find yoreself in more hot water than you ever seen before."

"I don't care who ye air, I ain't gonna let yuh outa my jail," Skinner blustered.

"Because yuh're afraid o' the Mormon Kid an' the rest o' the Rockin' M outlaws, huh," Sam taunted. "You, the man I heard say was gonna have so much law'n order here this summer that the place would smell like a bouquet o' pansies. Just read this an' let it seep into yore thick skull."

In his excitement Sam thrust another paper through the bars as far as he could reach. Skinner reached for it, but Sam seemed to change his mind and started to jerk the paper back. Instantly Skinner made a lunge forward to grab it, and the next instant Sam's other hand shot upward between the

bars and grasped the marshal's long chin-whiskers. With a jerk Sam brought the man's face up between two of the steel bars and held it there.

"Shoot him if he moves or makes a sound, Bob," Sam hissed.

"I'll git him," Bob said coolly. "Funny yuh didn't look in my boot for another gun, marshal."

There was no other gun, but Skinner's range of vision was now too limited to see it. Still grasping the whiskers Sam reached down with the other hand and possessed himself of the gun for which the marshal had been fumbling. When he got it he released the whiskers.

"Now we've got a gun, so unlock these cells an' be damned quick about it," Sam ordered curtly.

The marshal saw that he had been tricked, but he had been helpless anyway, and there were tears of pain in his eyes.

"The Mormon Kid'll kill me if I let yuh go," he moaned.

"An' I will if yuh don't," Sam said tartly. "Open up!"

With his own gun upon him the marshal dared not refuse. Alternately pleading and threatening he unfastened the cell doors. Meantime two hobos, the only other prisoners in the jail, were begging to be released.

"We wasn't hurtin' nobody," one of the men said. "We was just cookin' a mulligan down in the jungle when that ole hay-whiskered coot come along an' kicked our can over an' throwed us in."

"If yuh won't turn us out at least pull out the rest o' them whiskers an' leave 'em fer us to play with," the other hobo requested.

Sam Crane knew that the marshal was just the type to let the real badmen go and pick on the defenceless. As soon as he and Bob were released he ordered Skinner to release the hobos.

"T'anks, bo," one of the men said. "Now, if we can help youse any ——"

"You can," Sam said quickly. "One of you go down town an' tell the Mormon Kid that the marshal wants to see him up here right away."

"No, no!" Skinner protested. "He'll kill me."

"I don't think he will," Sam said. "Not for a while anyway. Now tell us where yuh put our guns."

There was a little office in the front of the building and Skinner had left their guns there. Feeling much better with their own hardware they ordered Skinner to be seated behind his desk, and started one of the hobos out to find the Mormon Kid.

It wasn't quite dark, and they realised that getting out of jail constituted only part of their escape. They must also get out of town, and if possible without attracting attention. This was Sam's reason for wanting to get control of the Mormon Kid.

In about twenty minutes the hobo returned with the Mormon Kid. Sam posted himself on one side of the door and Bob on the other. They had

warned Skinner not to dare speak until the Kid was inside the room. The recently self-important marshal was now a nervous wreck, but they had no time to feel sorry for him.

The hobo dropped behind as the Kid strode arrogantly into the office of the jail. "What the hell is wrong with ——" the Mormon Kid barked angrily at Skinner.

"Welcome, Kid," Sam Crane interrupted smoothly.

The Mormon Kid let out a blasphemous oath and tried to dart backward. The arms of the hobo went around him and he was held fast.

"Did you want me to shoot you again?" Sam demanded mildly. "Looks like three times would be enough. I'm tellin' yuh that my next bullet will be tuh kill. Right now though, I prefer tuh leave yuh locked up until you can be properly arrested for the murder of that Indian policeman, Bearskin. Hangin' is just what you need."

To their surprise the Mormon Kid seemed to go mad. Despite his crippled hands he broke loose from the hobo. Before he could reach the door he was seized in Bob Law's powerful arms, but even Bob had a hard struggle to subdue him. The Kid bit and scratched like a wildcat the while he screamed curses and weird imprecations.

Finally Bob succeeded in dragging the killer back to the cell which he had recently occupied and threw him inside with an expression of disgust.

Sam had brought the marshal along and pushed him into the other cell. Then they locked both doors.

"Whatever yuh do, boys, don't quarrel," Sam Crane advised sardonically.

"You'll answer for this damnable outrage," Marshal Skinner yelled.

The Mormon Kid had lapsed into deadly silence as suddenly as he had made the outbreak the other way.

Sam slipped each of the hobos a ten-dollar bill. "Go down to the Pioneer saloon an' buy everybody a few drinks," he told them. "Try to keep the crowd amused for about half an hour, an' then if I was you I'd beat it outa town plenty pronto."

"You'd just orta watch us," one of the men grinned.

Sam and Bob waited long enough for the two hobos to reach the saloon and then they left the jail. They kept to the back paths as much as possible on their way to the livery stable, but they saw no one on the streets who looked like an enemy.

At the stable they demanded their horses from a surprised holster. Apparently the man had heard of their arrest.

"Heck of a town this is," Bob growled to the fellow. "Know what they done? The fool marshal went an' locked us up thinkin' we was somebody else. If we hadn't had papers showin' who we was we mighta had tuh stay there all night."

"Oh! They let yuh go then," the fellow said.

"Of course. What did yuh think — that we'd broke jail?" Bob demanded in a tone which implied that feat would have been utterly impossible. It satisfied the man that everything was all right.

Nevertheless both heaved sighs of relief when they reached the outskirts of the town.

"Well, Samuel, we're outa that — thanks tuh the marshal's yen fer growin' long whiskers, but where do we go from here?" Bob inquired.

"Back tuh the range," Sam said promptly. "Us an' the Rockin' M outfit have still got some things tuh settle. They wanta stretch our necks, and we want to break their strangle hold on this country, keep 'em from gettin' control of that Indian reservation, and send them over the road. We've gone too far to back out now, and it can't end in a draw."

" 'Into the jaws of death rode the two who blundered,' " Bob paraphrased.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bingham on the Butte

In Sam's opinion a great deal depended upon the attitude of Ray Bingham. If the big Mound Valley cowman was friendly he might at least afford them a base of supplies, and if they had that both boys were confident of their ability to take care of themselves, at least until the full force of the Rocking M outfit arrived in the Bonneville country, and by that time Fernando Velez would have to show his hand.

Fox had said that Bingham's cattle were in the cedars only a few miles from Bonneville, and the boys found the camp without much difficulty. The outfit was in charge of Elmer Bench's son, the one Sam had seen with Bingham on the Portage River, and their reception was none too friendly.

"Where's Bingham?" Sam inquired.

"I don't know," Bench replied. "We ain't seen him for days. He went back up the Portage with Loren Allstead an' we ain't seen him since."

"You ain't? Well, it strikes me somebody'd better be lookin' for him," Sam said, remembering the many men who had been murdered on the range.

"We can't do it," the young fellow declared. "We got these cattle on our hands. There ain't enough browse here tuh keep 'em alive an' we have tuh haul 'em a few loads o' hay every day, an' the hay is goin' faster than the grass grows."

The fellow's attitude was thoroughly selfish, but there was no use to quarrel with him.

"I know," Sam said. "It's the cow business. Anyway, we're headin' up there ourselves, an' we'll look for Bingham. But we'd appreciate havin' a bite tuh eat, an' if yuh can spare it a little grub tuh pack on our saddles."

Bench somewhat sullenly invited them to dismount. They tied their horses to a rack containing hay and waited until a good meal of hot biscuits, fried potatoes, bacon, and coffee was prepared. In about an hour they were on their way.

The fact that Bingham had been missing from his outfit all the time since Sam had left the Portage was rather alarming, and Sam envisioned the big cowman lying dead somewhere upon the range with a bullet in his back. He knew that there were plenty others in the country besides the Mormon Kid who wouldn't be above committing such a deed.

Both boys were mounted upon horses as tough as they ever came, and when daybreak arrived they saw the huge bulk of Bingham's butte looming up four miles ahead. The horses were tired and Sam had resolved to get remounts from the Rocking M cavvy if it were still upon the butte.

They had ridden a mile farther when the dull boom of a rifle from somewhere on the butte assailed their ears. It was followed by a dozen or more shots in rapid succession. Every shot in this country now had an ominous suggestion and they instantly checked their horses to listen. But after that first furious volley the shots came only occasionally.

"Somebody is cornered up there on that butte, an' I'll bet my life on it," Sam declared positively. "Stay here till I find out."

He unfastened Bee Mercer's binoculars and made his way on foot to the top of a small pinnacle which was, however, high enough to afford a much better view of the butte. With the aid of the glass it didn't take him long to locate a tiny puff of smoke which occasionally followed the boom of a rifle. The smoke came from a cluster of rocks which cropped out at a steep place on the side of the butte, only a short distance above the Blacksnake River. The other shots came from sheltered places both above and below and though Sam couldn't tell how many men were surrounding the place it was apparent that the besieged man had no possible way to retreat.

Sam studied the country carefully and then returned to Bob and the horses. "They've got a man cornered all right," he reported, "an' if it's Bingham he must be in a bad way. We've gotta take a hand."

To reach the besieged man without being seen was obviously impossible. Whoever his antagonists were they had surely arranged themselves so that he couldn't leave his place of concealment without being exposed to their fire. It was necessary, therefore, to come upon the besiegers from the rear, and judging from the topography of the country Sam concluded that it might be necessary to encircle almost completely the butte in order to effect a surprise attack.

The besieged man was really out on a promontory abutting against the river, so that his foes had only to prevent his escape to the west. The river itself, because of a sweeping outward curve, blocked his passage from three sides. "I wish we had some fresh horses," Bob grieved.

"Mebbe we'll git some," Sam said.

They rode on for half a mile, having changed their course so that they were nearly always concealed by a growth of aspens, but here the snow was above their horses' fetlocks and made heavy going for the tired animals.

Suddenly they saw two horsemen hazing the Rocking M saddle stock down to the trail to the place where Sam had ravaged their camp.

"Come on," Sam said. "We'd just as well do a little bottlin' work ourselves."

They headed now directly toward the foot of the butte, across a country that was totally devoid of shelter. If anybody happened to look that way they would be seen, but the men with the cavvy had disappeared down the draw that led to their camp-ground, and Sam believed that the others were out of sight. If the man in the rocks happened to look that way he would see them, but they didn't mind that. Their jaded horses responded gallantly and covered the ground at a keen lope.

They struck the draw only a short distance above the little open flat nestling within two broken half circles of rim-rock. Except for the draw and the path down to the river the rim-rock presented a sheer obstruction at no place less than twenty feet high. Again Sam dismounted and ran forward on foot to investigate. Peering cautiously at the camp he saw the horses in the corral. Two men were eating breakfast, while a third man, the cook, was preparing more food.

Sam motioned for Bob to join him, and soon his partner came up. "They're comin' in a bunch at a time tuh eat breakfast an' git fresh horses," Sam whispered. "They ain't lookin' for nothing, so I'm gonna try tuh crawl in. You stay here an' cover me with yore rifle."

Bob nodded silently, and Sam moved cautiously forward. He was immediately in plain sight of the outlaws had they chanced to look that way, but they were all busy, especially the two who were devouring their food.

Sam ran for about a hundred feet, then turned to the left and began circling the edge of the little flat, close to the bottoms of the rim-rock. If he could get far enough without being seen he would have the horses inside the rope corral between him and his foes and could get almost upon them unseen. He proceeded cautiously now, crouched over and stepping with care lest he crack a bush and betray his presence.

Then, suddenly, a horse inside the corral caught sight of him and emitted a shrill whistle. Immediately every animal there whirled to look at him, and snorted wildly.

Such an alarm couldn't fail to arouse the men. The cook whirled, and the other two leaped to their feet. Sam was right out in the open, but the outlaws were within reach of shelter, such as it was. They hadn't recovered their tent, but Sam had noticed that the mess-wagon had been drawn out of the river. The cook leaped behind the wagon, and one of the men sprang behind a tarpaulin that had been stretched upon stakes as a sort of makeshift tent. But the third man stood his ground and went for his gun.

Sam had straightened up gun in hand and he fired as the boldest outlaw levelled his weapon. The man staggered and clutched at his shirt with his left hand even as his bullet drove harmlessly into the ground a yard in front of Sam Crane. Then a shot from the outlaw behind the tarpaulin shelter tore a hole through Sam's big Stetson.

Half a second later came the report of Bob Law's rifle and the outlaw behind the tarpaulin rolled out in sight and lay kicking convulsively like a felled steer.

Sprinting like a track man Sam got behind the horses, while two more bullets from Bob's rifle rattled among the wagon spokes.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" yelled the cook. "We give up!"

"Come out in sight, then," Sam ordered, and the man obeyed with both hands in the air, and stepping high. Bob came forward on a run.

The man Bob Law had shot was dead, and the other rider was painfully wounded. The cook was unarmed, and unharmed.

"Who've you hombres got treed up there on the butte?" Sam demanded abruptly.

"It's that guy Bingham," the cook answered. "But we ain't got him treed. They've offered tuh let him go, but he won't do it. The cussed fool said he'd stay here an' shoot at us long as he had a bullet."

"Naturally. This is his range an' he's holdin' it," Sam said.

"He'll never git a cow on it again," the cook asserted.

"No? Well, that remains tuh be seen. How many men yuh got?"

The cook hesitated and Sam suddenly jabbed him with the end of his gun. "Don't stop tuh think up lies," Sam warned.

"There's only six of us now. There's three more up yonder."

"Where's Neeves an' Hooten?"

"They — they went tuh Bonneville las' night. They was sent fer."

"Yeah, tuh help string us up. We know," Bob jeered.

"They musta swung by while we was at Bingham's camp or we'd a met 'em," Sam said. "Too bad. Looks like Pete Dargo had decided to send reinforcements up here. Bring our horses down while I supervise breakfast."

"First time I ever killed a man," Bob said in a voice that trembled a little.

"But I'm guessin' it won't be the last one, old man," Sam said. "This won't trouble you long."

They quickly changed their saddles to two of the best looking animals in the corral and turned their own mounts in with the others. Then, though Bob was inclined to protest that they ought to be doing something for Bingham, they helped themselves to the food that had been cooked.

"That old boy is tough enough to hold out a few hours longer," Sam said, "an' we'll stand a better chance when they come to us than if we got after them."

They had little doubt that the shots had been heard by the other men, and sooner or later they would come down to investigate, which accounted for Sam's idea that it would be safer to wait for the men than to go out after them. They unsaddled the outlaws' horses and turned them in with the others. When the men arrived they would see only two saddled horses and they would belong to the Rocking M. They moved the dead man into the improvised tent, and the wounded man had already crawled there to nurse his misery. There was very little difference in the colour of the coats worn by the outlaws and those of Sam and Bob, so the boys contented themselves by merely appropriating the outlaws' hats.

While they were eating they forced the cook to go about his business as though nothing out of the way had happened.

They were scarcely through their breakfast when a man rode in at a fast trot. He had halted at the bend to inspect the camp, but had been deceived.

"What the hell was all the shootin' about, Cincinnati?" he yelled at the cook. The next instant he found himself covered by two six-guns as the punchers leaped to their feet.

"Crawl down, hombre," Sam drawled. "Right glad tuh welcome yuh into our midst."

A look of dismay crossed the outlaw's face, but he was wise enough not to resist. In short order the fellow was disarmed. They allowed him to eat, but when he had finished his breakfast they tied his hands together behind his back and forced him to sit in apparent idleness where he could be seen by the next man who entered the draw.

Their next wait was a longer one. It was nearly an hour before another rider appeared, and this man came in very cautiously. That he strongly suspected something amiss was certain. He had no more than got in sight than he seemed about ready to bolt.

"Holler an' tell him tuh come on, Cincinnati," Sam hissed at the cook.

The man hesitated a moment, and then as he saw the muzzle of Sam's forty-five slowly rising toward his midriff he shouted:

"Come on in, Neckar. Everything's all right."

The outlaw rode forward slowly, a moving picture of suspicion. He could see the cook going about his business, as usual, one of his friends was in plain view and the other two were in sight, though their heads were down. Still

he seemed to feel that something was wrong. His eyes sought the corral and suddenly lighted upon two strange, sweat-stained horses. Instantly he whirled his horse and dashed back the other way.

Sam Crane fired while he was leaping to his feet, but the bullet went true and before the fellow's horse could turn Sam was spared having to shoot him in the back. The bullet struck the man in the side below the left arm and fairly lifted him out of the saddle. He had been shot in the heart.

The outlaw's horse had shared the man's suspicion apparently, for with a wild snort it stampeded back up the trail. The reins had been tied together and they had dropped over the saddle horn so that they didn't restrict the animal's speed.

"Watch here," Sam said crisply to Bob, and streaked it to the horse which carried his saddle.

He was soon in pursuit of the runaway horse, but not in time to keep it from being seen by the remaining man who was besieging Bingham.

This man, occupying a strategic position above the place where Ray Bingham was barricaded, had at once divined that something was seriously wrong. He had sprung on to his horse and galloped down the slope to a position where he could head off the fleeing horse if necessary, but before he reached that point he knew it was none of his friends in purusit. The failure of all of them to return was sufficient to let him know that something unpleasant had happened to them and he chose discretion in preference to valour.

Rolling the spurs to his horse the fellow started a desperate dash to What Creek Pass, and Sam Crane was too far behind to hope to overtake him. Reluctantly Sam turned back, as soon as he overhauled the saddled horse enough to hang a rope over its ears.

He had no more than turned when he saw the gigantic Ray Bingham coming down the side of the butte with amazing strides. The big cowman had a rifle in one hand and he was swinging his hat in the other.

"By grab," he yelled, "it's about time yuh was puttin' in here. I ain't eat fer dang'near three days. Gimme that horse 'fore I chaw a leg offen you."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A Rope From Out The River

BINGHAM'S explanation was soon given. As soon as he had received the letter which Sam Crane had sent him by Loren Allstead he had determined to come back and co-operate as Sam had asked him to do.

Finding nobody at the cow camp on Trapper Creek, and knowing that he couldn't do anything alone with the Mercer cattle he had gone on to order the trespassers from his own range. To his surprise he had found the Rocking M camp vacated. He soon discovered that the place had been wrecked and he guessed the men had gone to get more supplies. Having temporary control of the situation he had boldly resolved to remain on the butte, trusting to Sam to relieve him when he moved the Mercer cattle over. Loren Allstead had been with him and Loren had promised to tell Sam what he was doing. Thus the three-day siege had begun.

"But why ain't yuh brung them cattle, I wanta know?" the man finished.

"Mostly because I got fired," Sam grinned. "Velez has made another deal with the Rockin' M."

"Yeah, I allus knowed that damned Mex would break Tom Mercer 'fore he got through," Bingham raged.

"I don't know about that, but what we wanta do is throw in with yuh till we find out what sort of game they're playin' with the big Mercer herd on the Bottoms," Sam said.

"Suits me," Bingham said. "But my first job is gonna be hazin' these dam' Rockin' M cattle off my range. I think I'll git me a blackwhip an' make these dam' curs that's been shootin' at me do it theirselves. If they don't I'll jist naturally take the hide offen 'em."

"Looks like there was only two of 'em able tuh navigate, an' one o' them's a cook," Sam said. "I think we'd better let 'em take the casualties into Bonneville. They'd be more bother than they're worth."

"But they'll bring back more men," Bingham argued. "Nip Neeves an' Monk Hooten have been around here."

"We know about them," Sam said. "I reckon there'll be a bunch o' men along from down there anyway."

As they rode into camp big Bingham gave a snort like an enraged bull as his eyes dwelt upon the men who had been badgering him. The outlaws instinctively looked to Bob Law for protection. They were almost as much afraid of Sam as they were of Bingham.

"Sam, that feller Neckar was one o' the men who was helpin' Velez when I was on the Bottoms, and Cincinnati says the one who got away was Purd Holt," Bob said. "Looks like Dargo sent 'em up here so's tuh have men who'd recognise us if we did come back."

"That's a good guess, an' another one is that before night there'll be outlaws around this hill thicker'n bees around the first spring flower," Sam said.

"If they settle on me they'll think they lit on a cactus," Ray Bingham announced.

"Just the same we can't stay here," Sam declared. "As I see it our only

chance now is tuh prove that that outfit is tryin' tuh steal Tom Mercer's cattle."

"An' a fat chance o' that," Bob said disgustedly. "Purd Holt is on his way tuh the Bottoms right now to tell Dargo we're here, and the Mormon Kid an' that damn marshal will be up from the other way with a posse."

"An' I shore don't see how we're gonna find out what's become o' Tom's cattle if Velez has give that outfit a free hand on the Bottoms," Bingham said glumly.

"One thing about it, they can't put wings on 'em," Sam insisted. "I've been figgerin' some lately an' I've got a hunch I know what's goin' on. I may be wrong, but I think we're due tuh take another trip on to the reservation."

As soon as the famished Bingham had eaten enough food for three average men they prepared to leave the butte. They left enough horses in the corral to enable the cook and the wounded outlaw to take their dead companions to Bonneville.

"An' tell anybody who happens to inquire that we'll be around here if we're wanted," Sam told the cook.

"An' tell that damn Dargo if you see him, tuh git his dogeys off my butte before I shove 'em over the bluff into the river," Ray Bingham added.

Brave words, but all three realised that a final showdown with the Rocking M couldn't be long delayed, and the odds against them were overwhelming despite their recent victory over a mere handful of their foes.

Sam Crane's anxiety to know whether Bee Mercer had been returned to her home had grown to a veritable fever, and without saying anything to his friends he had determined to have an answer to that question within the next few hours.

Leaving the outlaws to take whatever course they thought best the three riders headed back toward What Creek Pass. From the summit they could see the Mercer cattle peacefully grazing on the south slopes just beyond the Portage.

"Boys," Sam said suddenly, "I'm goin' over tuh that cow camp, an' then over to the Indian village. I've got tuh know what Velez has done, an' if Ketchpaw happens tuh be back at his camp he can give us more information than anybody else. But we're more likely tuh find out things if I go alone. You boys turn up the river an' wait for me about three-four miles up."

"Well, I'm tellin' yuh if yuh don't show up in a reasonable time we'll be after yuh," Bob said.

"Aw, don't worry about me," Sam laughed. "If you fellows keep outa sight we'll be all right. I'm just half certain right now that them cattle are gonna be held somewhere on this reservation till they can be sold. That's where that crooked Agent and his mob of half-breeds come in. It's one

reason why those full bloods have been murdered — so the rest would be too terrified tuh tell anything even if they found anything out. But if old Ketchpaw learns anything I'm dead sure he'll let us know. There's one Injun who won't scare."

This theory hadn't come to Sam all at once, but when it was finally evolved almost everything that had happened seemed to corroborate it. It accounted for them being spied upon in Portage City, and for the strenuous efforts that had been made to eliminate the three main opponents of the Rocking M since.

A short, rapid ride brought Sam to the Mercer camp, and a few minutes later Charley Bishop rode into camp. Sam had kept concealed and when the young cowpoke saw him he betrayed astonishment, then fear, and finally an expression of the deepest hatred settled over his face. The boy was taking his and Bob's desertion rather hard, Sam thought.

"Hello, Charley," Sam smiled. "How're things goin'? Looks like the feed was a lot better, an' the breeds must be leavin' yuh alone."

"What're you doin' here?" the puncher demanded in a low, furious tone of voice.

"It may be hard to explain, Charley, but I'm still a heap interested in this outfit. Has Miss Mercer got home yet?"

"What's it to you?" Charley demanded insolently.

"I don't git yore idee fer being so hostile," Sam said coldly, "but I reckon there's some things you don't know. If Bee has got home I wanta know it."

"You'll never find it out from me — nor anything else," young Bishop gritted.

"No? Well, where's Loren Allstead? I'd rather ask him anyway."

For a moment the young fellow's eyes opened wide, but quickly closed to hostile slits as they had been before.

"*Yo're* askin' about Loren," he shot out. "That's a joke."

"Look here, Bishop, I'm tired of foolin' with you," Sam said hotly. "Yo're gonna answer my questions or ——"

"Or murder me like yuh did Loren, huh?" Charley Bishop gritted savagely, and his hand dropped upon the butt of his gun.

Sam didn't move.

"Loren — murdered!" he gasped. "Is — is that true?"

"Why bluff?" Charley demanded. "You murdered him. An' yuh done it in a dirty, underhand way that nobody but a rotten coward would do. If yuh had tuh kill him why didn't yuh kill him like a man an' not strangle him? He never harmed nobody, Loren didn't."

In his violent rage young Bishop wept, and he forgot to be afraid. He suddenly jerked his gun from the holster and pointed it at Sam's breast. And Sam, stunned by the accusation, made no effort to beat him to the draw.

"I reckon I'd need shootin' if I done what yuh seem tuh think I did," Sam said quietly. "But yuh'd better put up the gun an' talk this thing over. I never harmed Loren."

"Like hell I'll put up my gun," the puncher raved. "I got yuh now an' I'll take yuh in or shoot yuh like a dog."

Sam saw that there was no use to try to reason with the boy in his wrought-up condition.

"All right," he said coolly, "if we're goin' some place let's ride."

He deliberately turned his back upon the puncher and swung on to his horse.

"How was Loren killed?" he asked.

"He was strangled an' drug to death with your rope, yuh snake," Charley Bishop hissed.

"What's that?" Sam shot out so suddenly that young Bishop gasped. Regardless of the gun pointed at him Sam rode close up to the puncher and glared into his face. "Come clean now," he commanded in a tone that wouldn't be denied. "I didn't murder Loren, an' I ain't even been in the country, but I wanta know the truth about it — an' right now. Where was the body found?"

"It was found on What Creek," young Bishop answered sullenly. "Somebody had got a rope around his neck an' jerked him off his horse. They dragged him back an' forth till he was dead an' then left him."

"With the rope still around his neck?"

"Yes, an' it was yore rope," Bishop retorted. "I recognised it an' so did half a dozen other people who'd seen it. It was different from the manillas we use around here, an' there was a new-fangled brass hondo on to it. Yuh can't deny it either, because yuh got a new rope on yore saddle. Don't look like it's ever been used either."

"Sure I got a new rope," Sam admitted. "I bought it in Call's Fork three days ago. I bought it because I'd lost my old one in the Blacksnake River. Do you think I'd have left my rope around Loren's neck if I'd have killed him?"

"That sounds just as reasonable as that yuh lost it in the river," Charley come back. "Besides, yuh didn't have time tuh git it off because a bunch o' Rockin' M riders happened along an' darned near nabbed yuh."

"They did, huh? See here, Charley, when I left here I went to the Bottoms. Then I went to the Agency, from there tuh Portage City, an' then me an' Bob Law come on tuh Bonneville, got in there last night, an' come back tuh Bingham's butte this mornin'. Don't yuh see I couldn't have done it?" Sam argued.

"Yuh'll have a sweet time provin' that," Charley sneered. "Two o' the Rockin' M punchers, Purd Holt an' Jim Neckar, say they trailed yuh right

straight back here, an' Turk Donald said he seen yuh."

This certainly was something Sam hadn't expected, for all that he knew nothing was too despicable for the Rocking M bunch to undertake. It wasn't hard to see how he had been framed, and why. Loren Allstead had been trying to communicate with Ray Bingham when somebody had roped him. Before that the outlaws must have dragged their mess-wagon out of the river with his lasso rope still fastened to the tongue. Some of them had either seen the possibilities, or else had merely appropriated it because they needed a rope. And the man who would need a rope most was Nip Neeves, whose line had been shortened by old Ketchpaw's daughter. Meeting Loren they had seen the opportunity to murder him and fasten the crime upon Sam. Then they had concocted the story that he and Bob had come straight back across the reservation.

No longer could Sam have even a vague regret that he and Bob had recently killed two men. If not actually present when the inoffensive Loren had been so brutally murdered they at least knew about and were associated with the murderers.

The two punchers had talked with nobody on the road between Portage City and Bonneville, so it would be impossible to prove their alibi. Bob would be implicated just as deeply, Sam thought bitterly. Their enemies might even establish a motive for the crime. Presumably they had abandoned the Mercer outfit when it badly needed men, and it might be assumed that Sam had quarrelled with young Allstead. Apparently the Mormon Kid hadn't heard of this crime when they reached Bonneville, for assuredly it was a charge which would come much nearer standing up than the one of rustling with which they had been charged.

"Does Bee Mercer believe that I'd do a thing like that?" Sam demanded abruptly.

"Of course she believes it," young Bishop said harshly.

"Then she got home all right," Sam said half to himself. He was thinking that now he positively must find the man who had murdered Loren Allstead. It was one more score to be evened up with the crew of monstrous killers.

"An' it was yore doin's that she started over there in the first place," Bishop said bitterly. "If it hadn't been for Fernando no tellin' what mighta happened to her."

"Yeah, Fernando," Sam muttered. Somehow the mention of the Mexican's name nettled him.

All the time Charley Bishop's gun was pointed at him. "Come on now," Charley rasped. "Gimme that gun. You an' me is takin' a ride."

"Oh, yuh want my gun!" Sam exclaimed. "Well, yuh'll be sorry, because I can prove my innocence."

"That's yore business," the trembling nervous cowboy said. "Ride up

here where I can reach that iron. An' remember that I'll shoot tuh kill if yuh try any funny business."

"You're a determined young cuss, ain't yuh?" Sam sighed, and brought his horse alongside the other.

Charley reached out his left hand to possess himself of the gun, keeping his eyes firmly upon the man he felt he had good cause to fear and hate. But his falling hand encountered only the top of an empty holster. Sam's right hand had clutched the gun and unholstered it with such lightning speed that it was taken right out from under Charley's groping hand.

Sam could have shot the young cowpuncher before Charley could pull the trigger, but the boy wasn't an enemy and Sam hadn't the heart to do it.

"Drop it," he ordered as he jabbed the muzzle of his gun against the puncher's ribs. Instead, Charley Bishop pulled the trigger.

Sam had instinctively twisted sideways in the saddle, but being so close to the other it wasn't sufficient, and he felt a terrific stab of pain in his left shoulder, and the burn of the powder on his skin.

Still he wouldn't fire. He jabbed the end of his gun into the other's ribs so hard that Charley grunted with pain. "Put up that gun, you idiot," he said vibrantly, "before I spank you."

Suddenly scared within an inch of his life, perhaps as much by the fact that he had shot a man as by the gun pressed against his ribs, young Bishop dared not fire again. He slowly dropped his forty-five back in the holster.

"Now git goin' you," Sam commanded tersely, and the cowboy needed no second invitation.

Rolling the spurs to his bronc he fanned the breeze toward the Mercer ranch. Soon, no doubt, Sam thought grimly, another posse would be after him from that direction to string him up for the murder of poor Loren Allstead. At the moment it didn't much matter for his shoulder was hurting him like someone was twisting a red-hot knife in it, and a ghastly sickness was sending recurrent black waves dancing before his eyes.

He waited only until Charley Bishop was out of sight, then he got down off his horse and started to walk the few rods to the creek. He had gone only three steps when his legs crumpled under him, and he sagged to the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Piece of Green Hide

WHEN Sam Crane opened his eyes again his entire shirt front was soaked with blood. He felt weak and sick, but he cursed himself for having fainted,

and, with grimly set jaws, resolved that it shouldn't happen again.

He crawled over to the creek and bathed the wound with the ice-cold water until he felt the fever leaving and the pain begin to grow less. Then he got to his feet and walked over to the camp. By tying two dish towels together with one hand and his teeth he was able to contrive a sling for his arm. He discovered that it relieved the pain considerably.

Looking at his watch he discovered that it had been nearly two hours since he had arrived at the camp. Bob and Bingham would be expecting him, and he knew that he must reach them, if possible, before they started back to look for him and encountered some of their numerous foes.

Fighting hard to retain consciousness he crawled upon the Rocking M horse and headed for the Indian village. Despite his determination to keep a grip upon himself strange lights were dancing before his eyes and his mind was filled with vagrant, incoherent thoughts. With a feeling of vast relief, for which he couldn't quite account, he saw the dingy walls of the Indian tepees ahead of him.

He climbed laboriously out of the saddle, grinned as he saw a blur of strange dark faces somewhere in front of him, and then, despite his iron resolution, stubbed his toe and tumbled into the dirt.

A number of squaws rushed up and Sam was dragged into the shade. Among them he recognised Ketchpaw's daughter, Ida.

"Hello," he grinned. "Where's yore father?"

"He away," the girl replied. "He watch bad white men."

"Dangerous business," Sam granted.

"You keep plenty still," the girl ordered. "My mother she fix bad shoulder. Soon you be all right."

With a sigh Sam yielded to the suggestion. Already the squaw was binding soothing herbs over the wound, and to his surprise he found almost instant relief.

"Bullet — him go out," the squaw grunted. "You no eat — leave arm alone three days — be all right."

That kind of surgery, binding up a wound without either washing or disinfecting would have been considered certain death in any well regulated hospital, but Sam was grateful for the soothing feel of the herbs, and he maintained a firm faith that he was sufficiently tough to recover from anything.

To the surprise of the Indians Sam prepared to mount his horse again as soon as his arm was back in the sling. Suddenly little Ida Ketchpaw, after a brief argument with some of the others in Shoshoni, signed for him to wait. She ran into her father's tepee and returned a moment later with a piece of green cowhide about a foot wide and eighteen inches long, and held it out to him.

Immensely puzzled, Sam took the piece of hide and looked at it curiously. An instant later, however, he gave a startled exclamation, and spread the cowhide out flat on the ground. The hide had been ripped off of some dead animal's ribs, and it contained a brand. At first glance it looked to be the bold T O M of Tom Mercer's iron, and then Sam saw two small freshly burned curlycues at the bottom of the M, the one at the left curling over almost to the O. Without the first two letters the brand would have been the Rocking M. Without the rockers of the M it was Mercer's brand. But with the two curlycues it was a combination of both brands — T O M.

Sam comprehended the situation instantly. The two small curlycues had been added to Mercer's brand to make the combination. At first glance, with those three big letters standing out on a critter's ribs in bold relief, the rockers of the M wouldn't be noticed — or so it would be assumed. It was a case of brand blotting with reverse English. Anybody not knowing the truth would think it a clever scheme to steal Rocking M cattle.

Now Sam saw why Dargo and his men wanted complete control of the big Mercer herd for a while. As soon as the cattle appeared on the range, after the alterations had scarred over, Dargo would claim that they were his cattle, and that it was the TO which had been added to his brand instead of it being the rockers of the M that had been added. Who would believe that the Rocking M would have done the brand altering when by no possible way could a T O M be made to look like a Rocking M?

Bob Law had said that Mercer's cumbersome brand couldn't be worked over, but it had proved to be a simple operation after all. There was only one weakness in Dargo's contemptible scheme. The man wouldn't dare to claim the cattle until the brand scars were healed. This confirmed Sam's earlier theory that the Mercer herd was to be held somewhere, presumably upon the reservation, until the scabs came off the curlycues which had been recently burned on. Then, when the next roundup occurred, Dargo would claim that the animals had all been stolen from his and it was a certainty that Tom Mercer wouldn't be able to fight him for their possession. The crippled cowman and even his daughter might be indicted for cattle rustling.

"Where did you git this?" Sam asked suddenly.

"My father he bring here," Ida Ketchpaw said. "I think he follow white man's cattle. This one die — my father he skin off brand."

Sam nodded. The Indian policeman had been on the job after all, though no doubt unable to get close to the cattle; the enemy hadn't thought about him running across a dead animal on their trail.

"You tell Ketchpaw I'm taking this," Sam said to the girl. Then, to her utter amazement, he opened a generously filled purse, and pressed five gold coins into her palm.

Hooking his toe into the stirrup Sam swung painfully aboard his horse.

He was well aware that the country was fairly lousy with enemies, but now at last he had something definite to go on.

Bob and Bingham would be impatiently waiting for him somewhere, but he felt that the delays, and even the wound he had received, were well worth the inconvenience. When he rejoined his friends they would only have to find that herd of cattle with the freshly-made brands to have the goods on Dargo and his crew of outlaws. The clever scheme of the outlaws might yet be the very thing to bring about their own undoing.

Time was the essence of the undertaking, and they must elude the various parties that would be looking for them until the stolen herd of cattle could be located.

Sam had just reached a ridge top overlooking the Portage when his ears were for the second time that day assailed by the staccato rattle of gunfire. He dragged his horse to a stop and listened with a premonition of disaster.

The firing was lower down on the river, and after listening for a few minutes Sam ascertained that it was coming from a rapidly moving party. He spurred his horse along the side of the ridge until he had a wider view, and then he saw two men in rapid retreat toward What Creek Pass. They were being pursued by a posse of at least fifteen men.

One glance was enough to enable Sam to diagnose the situation. Tiring of waiting for him, Bob and Bingham had started up the river, and had encountered a posse which Purd Holt must have raised somewhere much quicker than they had expected. There had been nothing left for them but flight toward What Creek. What would happen then, Sam could only guess, but he couldn't desert his friends in their extremity.

Rolling the spurs to his mount he fell off the ridge like a baby cyclone, but the posse was a good three miles ahead of him. Soon both friends and enemies had disappeared among the twisting bends of What Creek Pass. Sam wondered if Bob and Bingham would attempt to make a stand in the pass or go on to Bingham's Butte.

By the time his lathering mount reached the top of the pass the others were out in the open country beyond. Sam wisely stopped his horse and unslung the binoculars. He saw at once that his friends had swung to the right in an attempt, he presumed, to reach the upper bridge across the Blacksnake. If they could reach there ahead of their foes they would stand a good chance of effecting their escape as soon as it became dark.

Then, just as it looked like they would make it he saw them swing abruptly to the left and head for Bingham's Butte. A minute or so later he saw the reason. Another posse, coming from Bonneville, presumably to look for Sam and Bob, had headed the two men off. The only thing left for them now was to make for Bingham's Butte and try to hold their forces at bay until help arrived. If that failed there would be nothing left for them but the

river, which, swollen by the spring thaws, and pouring down a narrow gorge between walls of black basalt, it would be almost sure suicide to attempt to cross.

As his friends cut back across ahead of the first posse the firing recommenced. They had distanced their pursuers at first, but the turn brought them again within range. Tremendously excited, Sam watched his two friends returning the fire while all concerned rode at breakneck speed and poured leather to their horses with one hand while they threw lead with the other.

Bob and Bingham were trying to reach the nest of boulders which had previously sheltered Bingham, but they were cut off. As a last desperate effort they turned into the narrow draw which led to the cow camp. Here they seemed able to check their foes temporarily, for the outlaws hurriedly turned back out of range. But they themselves were effectively bottled up with the black, roily river as their only means of escape.

Soon the two posses joined, and Sam realised that unless he could manage to help the besieged men they were doomed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dangerous Waters

THERE was no one to whom Sam could appeal for help. The Mercers, he supposed, believed him to be a murderer and a traitor. Even Bingham's friends wouldn't come to his rescue against the powerful Rocking M. As for the Indians, none of them could be lured into such an encounter when death lurked behind every bush for them on their own reservation. Whatever could be done he must do himself.

To attempt to attack the posse single-handed would be rank folly. The only chance that he could see was to wait until dark, then ride up to the bridge, cross the Blacksnake, and follow down the other bank until he was just across from his friends. The river wasn't so terribly wide, even though it was swift, and if they could get within reach of his lasso rope he might drag them to safety.

It had been an eventful day, and he was glad that it was almost gone. He rode into some timber above the pass and watched the conduct of the siege as long as he could see. From the preparations he guessed that the outlaws intended to keep firing from the rim-rock and hold their victims under cover until after dark. Then, no doubt, some of them would be able to sneak down the draw and get into the enclosure. Bob and Bingham wouldn't have a chance then. Therefore, as soon as it was twilight, he rode madly toward

the bridge. He crossed the wagon road which led to Bonneville and after fording a raging creek he was upon the legitimate summer range of the Rocking M. He continued on straight east for three or four miles until he reached the bridge across the Blacksnake.

This was the bridge where the five hundred head of Rocking M cattle had been crossed, and a few miles away was the Paradise Plateau over which the other cattle from the Bottoms should trail. Hastily Sam turned down the stream, and in little more than an hour he was directly across the river from the Rocking M cow camp where he had already had two thrilling adventures, and where his friends were now besieged.

There were plenty of signs that Bob and Bingham were still over there, but it was too dark for them to see him, and it would be impossible for him to make himself heard above the roar of the river. Up at the bridge the water had made the structure creak under the highest flow of water for years. The recent warm weather, which was a Godsend to the cattlemen, had filled the river from bank to bank with black turgid water; a usual spring condition from which the stream had got its name — Blacksnake.

For anyone to attempt to swim it after dark with a horse, or otherwise, would be a foolhardy undertaking unless there was help on the other side, and then it would be at best a mad gamble with death. Yet under the circumstances it seemed the only possible chance.

Sam could still swing a rope with his right arm, and if they got into trouble he hoped that he would be able to throw it far enough to drag them to safety. One at a time, of course.

But now it appeared that he must wait to let them know of his presence. For all that they were just across the river, and their foes on the other side of them, they wouldn't know that he was there. The firing had ceased and he hoped that an attack wouldn't be made until morning. Swimming the river would be much less dangerous in the day time.

He was just about to get off his horse when the firing started up again. Volley after volley of rifle shots rattled from the rim-rock surrounding the camp. Above the roar of the water he could hear the demoniac yells of the outlaws mingled with the shots. With a bitter curse he realised that the blood-mad outlaws were determined to kill his friends, or drive them into the river without delay.

Swiftly Sam hunted for a place to get down to the bank of the stream, beneath the forty-foot basalt bluff; but he had to ride down stream more than half a mile before he found a break in the rocks which a horse could traverse. Then he had a difficult time getting back upstream because in one place a mass of loose boulders crowded so hard against the bank that a misstep on the part of his horse would have resulted in a broken leg. In other places they had to clamber around great rocks where a slip would have

plunged them into the river.

At last, however, he was back across from the little flat where the cow camp had been located, and he had a strip of level ground from six feet to a rod in width between the sheer bluff and the water.

The firing could now be heard distinctly, and he realised that his friends were being driven closer to the river. He could plainly see the flashes of some of the outlaws' rifles as they fired from the rim of the basalt reef above the little flat, and had he remained above the bluff he was sure that he could have made it a bit interesting for some of them with his own rifle, but he doubted very much if he could reach the men now since his vision was restricted by the bluff on the other side. Nevertheless, he got his rifle out of the scabbard and fired a few shots toward the points where the flashes came from.

It was impossible to hold the weapon steady on account of his injured arm, and he was sure that his shots were going over the enemy's heads anyway, but he hoped it would let Bob and Bingham know he was there.

A few minutes later he heard a shout from just across the river, and the vague form he saw there he knew must be Bob or Bingham. He yelled back, and was answered, but the words of both were drowned by the angry thunder of the swollen river. But Sam was sure they must know who he was. He could make out their horses huddled in the single path down to the river, and as the rifle firing abruptly ceased and was followed by the more staccato crack of six-guns, he saw both men leap into the saddle and spur the reluctant mounts to the verge of the stream.

Sam yelled at them beseechingly to take it one at a time, though he knew that he couldn't be heard. There came a chorus of victorious yells from behind them, and the two horses plunged wildly into the black waters.

To Sam's dismay the river seemed to pick up the two men and fling them downstream as if they were two chips. He saw both of them totally submerged. Then one horse bobbed up without a rider. Almost instantly the other horse came up and went down again. When it reappeared its rider had slipped out of the saddle, but Sam saw him bobbing along behind, evidently clinging to the animal's tail while it swam desperately for shore.

Sam, long before this, had his rope down, and he had tied the end hard and fast. He held the coils and his bridle reins in his half useless left hand while he swung a loop with his right. He forced his horse to keep even with the half-drowned men in the river, praying that one of them would get close enough for him to venture a cast.

They were being carried down stream at terrific speed, and suddenly Sam realised that the mass of boulders he had had trouble crossing was right ahead. By the time he could get his horse across it the men in the river would be too far down for him to hope to reach them again.

Sam knew Bob to be a powerful swimmer. One horse and one man were now lost to his sight. That horse hadn't even reached the middle of the stream. But the other horse was swimming valiantly, and Sam could see that the man clinging to its tail was also making a mighty effort to keep from being an encumbrance to the horse. He thought that this must be Bob.

Regardless of who it was, the other man had now passed beyond the hope of aid. Bringing his horse to the very edge of the water, Sam measured the distance and flung the full forty feet of his twine out across the wavy black water, and the small, neat loop he had made settled deftly over the head of the horse, held just above water.

He was glad he had tied hard and fast, for all the great danger, when the rope sang out in protest; for otherwise he couldn't have got his dallies fast enough. His horse came perilously near to being yanked over into the river, but it braced itself in time, and the horse he had roped was checked.

For a minute or more it was a grim test between the mighty power of the river and the slim line of manilla hemp, but the rope held. The horse, still swimming lustily, veered around toward the bank, and with the aid of the rope clambered out to safety. A choking, spluttering man still clung to its tail.

Utterly regardless of what he did to his shoulder Sam leaped to the ground and rushed to assist the man to his feet. Breathless, and weighted down by the muddy water in his garments, it was some little time before the man could arise. When he did Sam saw that it was Ray Bingham.

Bob Law had gone to destruction in the river!

It was almost upon Sam's tongue to curse Ray Bingham for having been the man saved, but his sanity quickly asserted itself. They had all done the best they could — nobody was to blame. But Bob, the best friend he had ever known, was dead. Murdered, Sam reflected bitterly, by a ruthless mob of outlaws — murdered more brutally than if they had killed him outright.

With a bitter curse upon his lips Sam turned and shook his fist across the river. He wished now that he had ridden boldly in from the other side and got as many of them as he could, since Bob was dead anyway, and so far as he could now see he and Bingham had only temporarily averted disaster.

Despite his efforts to work with one hand he had been compelled to use the arm in the sling a little, and now it felt like his shoulder was being ground between two huge stones. The half-drowned Bingham was in little better shape. "We gotta do something," Bingham gasped out. "If they beat us tuh the bridge they may chase us up on the plateau into their trail herds an' we can't dodge 'em there anyway."

"There's just one thing tuh do as I see it," Sam said slowly. "If we run from 'em too much we're done. We've gotta git back across the river and on to the reservation."

He told the Mound Valley cowman about the piece of cowhide he had seen at the Indian camp, and his own deductions.

"An' with the help o' that damn greaser foreman their game has been plumb easy," Bingham said bitterly as he contrived to get up and shake himself like a huge dog. "I allus knowed he'd steal Tom Mercer blind some day."

"But we can't forgit that Velez may have been forced tuh do everything he did to save Bee," Sam reminded.

"Don't yuh believe it," Bingham sneered. "Prob'ly he had her kidnapped as much tuh make himself a hero by savin' her as fer an excuse fer lettin' all them cattle be stole. I tell yuh he's been a lot too thick with that outfit ever since he came back here. I've allus figgered he was the one who brung 'em back."

"When he came back? What d'ye mean?" Sam demanded.

"Why, Velez punched cows fer a number o' years. Then, 'bout three or four years ago, he went away for a year. When he came back Tom made him his foreman. The Rockin' M showed up about the same time."

"By — Gawd!" Sam muttered thickly.

If he had only known that before, either he or Fernando Velez would have been dead before now. Bee had told him she had known Velez for twelve years. He hadn't thought to inquire whether the Mexican had been in the Bonneville country all that time. Now it appeared that Velez had been away during the year that the bandit Velez had operated in New Mexico. Velez, the man who had shot Marve Crane in the back, but hadn't killed him so quickly that he couldn't scrawl the name Velez with his finger in the dust into which he had fallen.

Like one reviewing a dream Sam recalled his last meeting with Velez and the exhibition of fast shooting to which the Mexican had treated him. He knew that Velez could beat him on the draw, but he didn't believe that the man could get him so quickly that he couldn't send back a bullet before he died. Even with a bullet through his heart, he told himself grimly, he would hold his gun steady long enough to avenge that brutal murder.

Presently the two badly used up men crawled back upon their horses and made their way to the top of the bluff. They were obliged to ride slowly and it was long after midnight when they cautiously approached the bridge. They had half expected to find it guarded, and the fact that it wasn't indicated that the outlaws hadn't seen Sam at all, and believed that the other two had perished.

They held a brief council close to the bridge and then parted. Ray Bingham had agreed to take a short cut that he knew of through the Aspen hills and tell Tom Mercer and his daughter about the misbranding of their cattle, and show them the piece of cowhide Sam had brought from Ketchpaw's

camp. And then the cowman promised to try to raise as many of the Mound Valley and lower Portage ranchers as he could to conduct a search for the misbranded herd of cattle. They were faced, however, by the apparently insurmountable difficulty that the Indian Agent would refuse them permission to ride upon the reservation. It was an autocratic privilege which the crooked Sproule enjoyed.

"There's something else I want you tuh do, Bingham," Sam said. "In that letter Loren Allstead took yuh I wrote you that I had money tuh make good any loss that might occur. I'm writin' you a cheque, Bingham, for ten thousand dollars. I want you to make an advance payment on Mercer's ranch and cattle for a lump sum. Then, if anything happens to me my attorney will have to complete the payments. That'll protect them at any rate."

"But, man, that wouldn't be fair tuh yore own heirs," Bingham protested.

"Heirs? My heir is dead — he went down the river," Sam said jerkily. "My people are all dead — Velez got the last one. Bob has no folks, an' I made a will leavin' my money tuh him. So there's no reason why I shouldn't do this for the Mercers."

"I guess not — an' Bee Mercer is worth it."

"Now one thing else," Sam said. "Yuh mustn't mention Velez to 'em till yuh git the deal through. You can't make Bee believe he's crooked."

"All right," Bingham grumbled, "but if you don't git that Mex I will."

They shook hands and parted. In a few hours it would be daybreak and Sam Crane was going back into the heart of his enemies' territory.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Rocking M Rides High

A RED-RIMMED sun rolled over the distant hills beyond the Blacksnake, beginning its daily attack upon the fast receding patches of snow. Sam Crane lay ensconced in the same nest of boulders on Bingham's Butte where Ray Bingham had once made a stand. His hungry horse was concealed in a cleft between two monster slabs of rock.

Not more than a thousand yards below him lay the outlaw camp. Presumably the supposed posse of the law from Bonneville, and the others who had chased Bob and Bingham into the river, had spent the night there. But unless somebody happened to come to that particular place Sam was safely hidden.

It wasn't long before there were ample signs of activity among the outlaws. First, Sam saw a lone rider coming from What Creek Pass at top speed. With his binoculars Sam made out one of Turk Donald's half-breeds.

Half an hour after that man's arrival three other men headed back toward the pass, and they were riding fast. Sam's good fist clenched as he recognnised in them three of his worst enemies, the Mormon Kid, Nip Neeves and Monk Hooten. He would have given much for the privilege of meeting those three again, but it was now impossible. Men were moving about below like ants and he could do nothing against a young army.

Sam had hoped that he could find out something by watching the departure of the outlaws. They had no cattle on the range as yet, except the small herd they had trailed up at so much expense in order to steal Bingham's range, and he doubted very much that many men would remain on the butte. If he couldn't follow any of them to the stolen Mercer cattle he had thought that he might perhaps find out something if he could capture one of those who remained.

It wasn't long until the men below began to ride away from the butte in little groups of from two to six. They all headed up toward the pass, which led Sam to believe that they intended to keep on searching for him on the reservation. He was satisfied by this time that the Rocking M men wouldn't give up the man-hunt under any circumstances, now that they probably thought Bob and Bingham were both dead.

From the number of Rocking M men present and the speed with which Purd Holt had gathered a posse, Sam supposed that the trail herds from the Bottoms must be close at hand. Not all of them could be coming over Paradise Plateau either, and indeed everything indicated that the crooked Indian Agent must have given them permission to trail straight through the heart of the reservation.

The thicker they were, he thought grimly, the more he could thin them out.

Watching carefully with glasses he saw one man leave the camp whom he was surprised to see there. It was fat Pete Dargo, the head man of the Rocking M.

Along with Dargo was another man who looked vaguely familiar to Sam, but he couldn't identify him. These two seemed to be the last ones to leave the camp, for just before they departed the cavvy had been driven out by two other men, who had then gone on to the pass. The man Sam had looked for most keenly he had not seen. That man was Fernando Velez.

Sam guessed that a cook would have been left at the camp. It might be the man Cincinnati, or it might not. Whether it would be worth while trying to force some information out of him Sam didn't know, but he was sure that the messenger who had arrived that morning had brought word of some

importance and he might find out what it was.

He was sorely tempted to try to intercept Pete Dargo and his companion before they reached the pass, but he had to give it up because they were too close to the men ahead, and if he was to accomplish anything he knew he must move with a careful mixture of boldness and caution.

It was hard to keep his eyes from roaming to where the treacherous Blacksnake rumbled its way around the base of the butte. He wanted to shake his fist at it and break out into raving curses because it had robbed him of his friend. It wasn't the river, he knew, but he had never realised just how much he had come to depend upon Bob Law.

His bitter thoughts roamed to the Mercer ranch with resentment at the disaster which threatened Bee and her crippled father. If the crooked plans of Pete Dargo and his associates worked he knew it would kill Tom Mercer. He dared not think what it would do to Bee.

As always when he thought of Bee he thought of Velez. The Mexican was still an enigma to him, but now that he was again practically certain in his own mind that Velez was his brother's murderer he could see in the man only a menace to those he worked for. The thing that haunted him was that after it was all over the girl would continue to think that Velez was a friend. Reduced to poverty Bee might marry the man as a reward for the sympathy he was sure to express.

As for him she no doubt still believed that he had murdered Loren Allstead. But if Ray Bingham escaped and carried out instructions she would soon know that he at least meant her no harm. He didn't believe that Bingham would be able to help them much in their fight against the Rocking M, even with the evidence of the piece of green cowhide. The Indian Agent would be able to block any investigation they might attempt to make. He feared that Bee would be too proud to accept the chance to unload all their loss on him, or his supposed heirs.

But if she accepted it and then married Fernando Velez it would be the final bit of grim irony which had dogged the cow-puncher's trail ever since he had returned from a long period of wandering when he heard the news of his brother's murder. With a stern determination to avenge his brother's cowardly death Sam had turned everything into cash. The Crane ranch in New Mexico had been a prosperous one, and even after a quick and careless sale Sam had more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to his credit in the bank.

For that money to fall eventually in the hands of his brother's murderer — it was enough to make a man go mad. He must, he told himself, manage to stay alive long enough to come once more face to face with Velez.

When the last man had disappeared from sight through the pass, Sam mounted his horse and trotted down to the head of the draw. With only a

moment of hesitation he rode on in. The man called Cincinnati was back working at his trade as cook, and as Sam had surmised he was alone. At sight of Sam the fellow let out a squawk and elevated both hands.

"That's usin' right good judgment, hombre," Sam told him curtly.

"My Gawd, do you live on this here butte?" the cook demanded. "Yuh shore have a habit o' poppin' into this damn ketch-hole. If I have any thing tuh say about it we'll move our camp on to a knoll."

"Not a bad idea at that," Sam remarked. He had been able to take toll from the outlaws in there, but he had suffered more than he had gained when he lost Bob Law. "Right now, though, we're havin' a little talk," he went on. "Any more men around here?"

"Not a man," Cincinnati said.

"Where've they gone?"

"Well, part o' the Rockin' M cows are just over the divide in Buckskin basin. Our boys have gone back there; while the gang from Bonneville under Marshal Skinner are still lookin' for you," the cook informed.

It dawned upon Sam then that Skinner, minus his whiskers, was the man he had seen with Dargo.

"Tell me: What was that half-breed's hurry this morning?" Sam shot out.

The cook wiped his hands on the greasy apron he wore around his waist, and shook his head stubbornly.

"Don't know nothin' about it," he declared.

"See here, hombre! Last night yore rotten gang run my two friends into that river. God only knows where they are now. Now you're gonna answer me truthful or take a walk backward into the water. Which'll it be?"

Cincinnati was no fighting man, else he wouldn't have been a cook. The slack pouches along his jaws quivered with fear.

"I — I'll tell yuh all I know, mister, but it ain't much," he stated. "All I know is just what I happen tuh overhear. I know that breed come from Turk Donald, but all I heard him say was somethin' about Fernando Velez, an' the Mormon Kid kinda grinned an' told Neeves an' Hooten they'd orta go see him. Then them three rode away."

Sam wasn't in the least surprised. It was the most natural thing in the world for these four to get together. He only wondered why Velez had not come himself instead of sending a messenger.

"Velez, I suppose, is with the cattle he and the Rockin' M have stolen from Tom Mercer," he said slowly. "Where are they?"

"Hones' tuh Gawd, I don't know," the cook faltered. "I don't know anything about it."

"Don't know where they were tuh meet Velez?"

"No."

"Where is Turk Donald's camp?"

"I don't know that."

Convinced that the man was really ignorant about the information he wanted, Sam mounted his horse and rode out of the draw. He had a strong premontion that this was to be an epochal day upon the reservation. Upon this day would be decided the question of whether the valuable grazing privileges of the reservation would continue to be divided up fairly among the cattlemen who had long enjoyed them through the fair treatment of Tom Mercer, or whether they were to be monopolised by the Rocking M under the predatory leadership of Pete Dargo.

Looking at it calmly Sam Crane was forced to admit that everything favoured the big outfit to win. Only one thing could defeat them, and that was the discovery of the herd of stolen cattle with the fresh additions to their brands.

Dargo and his associates had been confident of their ability to prevent that discovery else they never would have taken such a chance in the first place. But they had had everything in their favour; brute force as represented by their horde of gunmen riders, a venial Indian Agent, and a weakened opposition. Indeed, the bullet which shattered Tom Mercer's spine had all but removed all opposition. Such as did remain was more than counterbalanced, Sam felt, by the treachery of Mercer's foreman.

Ray Bingham had been but a small thorn in the side of the outlaws, but they had gone to heavy expense to get cattle to his butte before he could arrive, and undoubtedly they had meant to murder the man as they had tried to murder Tom Mercer.

Finally, to make sure that no trouble arose from the Indians they had instituted a campaign of deliberate murder which had the full-bloods properly terrified. They would be sure to stay away from territory controlled by Turk Donald, the unspeakable half-breed.

Actually the only menace to the Rocking M plans at the present moment seemed to be a small piece of stinking rawhide, and the six-gun in Sam Crane's holster.

As Sam rode along the foot of the butte he suddenly caught sight of his own horse, Gunboat, with Bob's mount, Thunder. The two horses had chosen to separate themselves from the Rocking M cavvy. Sam approached them without difficulty and Gunboat came up at his call. After a momentary hesitation Sam changed his saddle to Gunboat's back and let the Rocking M horse go. When he was nearly to the top of What Creek Pass he looked back and saw the brown Thunder horse following along behind.

"If only poor Bob was on him — things wouldn't look half so black," he murmured.

At the top of What Creek Pass he paused to survey the country ahead of him with his binoculars. The Mercer cattle, which Turk Donald had once

almost destroyed, still were grazing peacefully on range that grew larger each day as the edges of the snowbanks retreated before the lengthening hours of daylight.

He glimpsed a few of the Rocking M riders toiling up to the divide which led down into Buckskin basin, where, in defiance of the rights of the Indians, the Rocking M herds were being held until the range beyond the portage grew better. The Indian village was not in sight, but if Ketchpaw's people were still there he felt assured of a welcome, and if any Indian on the reservation would know where the Mercer cattle were at the present time old Ketchpaw would be the man.

Nothing happened on the way down out of the pass, nor until he reached the Indian village. That there was some excitement there he knew as soon as he rested eyes upon the place. The ponies belonging to the band had been gathered in and the squaws and papooses were running about like scared rabbits. Close to one of the larger tepees he could see a bunch of bucks standing in a group, while before them were four men on horseback.

It wasn't a quarter of a mile to the camp, and Sam hardly needed to unsling the glasses to identify the horsemen. To make sure, however, he took a long look at them through the glass and ascertained that the man doing the talking was none other than Turk Donald. His three companions were the Mormon Kid, Neeves and Hooten.

From the edge of a grove of aspen Sam watched the four men suddenly whirl their horses and ride away. Anxious though he was to keep on their trail Sam couldn't resist the temptation to detour by the village. If he had ever thought Indians to be stoical he could change his mind now. Everything was in disorder. Some squaws were tearing down the wickiups; others were trying to put them back. The bucks were as uncertain as the squaws; some were arguing for one thing, some for another. Ketchpaw wasn't there.

At Sam's sudden entrance a startling silence fell over the camp. The bucks, most of them complete strangers to Sam, glowered at him coldly. Then Ketchpaw's squaw, who had dressed Sam's wound the day before, began to talk. A few minutes later some of the bucks gathered around his horse. Just behind them he could see the girl Ida.

"You Tom Mercer's work boy?" a middle-aged Indian by the name of Sohnup demanded.

Sam nodded acquiescence.

"Me, I'm lookin' for Tom Mercer's cows from the Fort Call Bottoms," he said. "You know where I ketch-um?"

There was undoubtedly fear on the swarthy faces.

"You ask-um — Tu'k Donald," Sohnup replied glumly.

"No, Long-legs, you stay away from Turk Donald — he kill you," Ida cried out.

The bucks glanced at her with surprise at this breach of etiquette, but the little Indian girl wouldn't be silenced.

"My father is gone, and maybe something happen to him, too," she said: "Just now Turk Donald come here with three bad white men. He say we must move."

"So that's it," Sam snorted. "That mangy half-breed tells you people to move an' you move. Ain't you got a right here?"

There was a lambent fire in the black eyes of the bucks. Presently one of them spoke.

"Too many Injun shoot in back. Tu'k Donald white man's friend — white man agent's friend."

With a shrug the man turned away, addressed his squaw in the native tongue, and she began to pack up their meagre belongings.

Sam realised that nothing could be hoped for from the Indians and they couldn't be blamed. With a crooked agent to protect the assassins who roamed the reservation and shot them down from ambush their case was hopeless.

If the missing herd of cattle was to be found in time to do any good Sam felt that he must find it himself. Wheeling Gunboat around he took the same trail by which the four renegades had recently left the village.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A Tricky Trail

THOUGH Sam rode at a fast trot after leaving the Indian village he failed to sight the four men again. Either they had changed their course or he had missed them by taking the wrong ridge. They had appeared to be heading toward the high tablelands which lay between the head of the Portage and the Blacksnake, and there were many small canyons heading into the river from all directions. Since the north slopes, and many of the canyon bottoms were still under snow any rider travelling a considerable distance would be obliged to keep to the bare rocky ridge tops. Even here drifts occasionally had gone that way.

It was the absence of such tracks which soon convinced Sam that he had lost his men. He decided that they must have veered off and followed the others to Buckskin basin. There was only a chance, anyway, that they were on their way to the stolen herd, and it was more important to find it than it was to trail the renegades.

Reluctant to turn back, and realising the folly of going into the strong-

hold of his enemies Sam struggled on. The drifts became deeper and more numerous, but the sun had thawed the crust, and his horses were able to plough their way through. Bob's Thunder horse had struck along, and when Gunboat tired of breasting the drifts, Sam changed horses, and the gray followed behind.

Once he reached the top of the divide he felt certain he would strike some long, bare ridge leading down to the lower country. And somewhere in that country, in some hidden canyon or basin, he believed the Mercer cattle were being held. He knew that he might find them only by accident, but two thousand head of cattle couldn't be covered by an umbrella. Moreover, the rustlers would hardly expect anybody to come upon them from above.

Long before he reached the top of the divide he realised that he would have to go on or camp out over night. It would soon begin to freeze, and there would be no travelling with any success, or at least with any mercy to his horses until it began to thaw.

It had already begun to freeze a stiff crust on the snow when he got across the divide and as he had hoped, found himself in a long hog-back that had been swept free from snow.

He paused long enough to sweep the country with the handy binoculars. The desert lay hazy in the distance, and to his right lay the deeply guttered range through which the Blacksnake plunged on its course. With a choke in his throat he remembered that Bob Law's mangled body was probably caught in some mass of driftwood somewhere in the region beneath his gaze.

There was nothing he could do about that now. Later, if he lived, he meant to drag the stream until he did recover the body of his pal. Now his job was to find the missing cattle; next, to settle with the men who were holding them.

It was obvious that he would have to make a camp. Just before dark he selected a sheltered nook where there were plenty of dead limbs to build a fire, and turned his horses loose to graze on the long dry grass along the ridge. The horses wouldn't go far, but after thinking it over Sam decided to shiver. A fire there might be seen for miles and be a complete betrayal. Moreover, he was warmly dressed, and he had his saddle blanket. He was cold, stiff and hungry in the morning, but he felt better as soon as he was once more on his way.

Before noon he was on the flats at the head of the Bottoms. He could see where several herds of cattle had been trailed toward the mouth of the Blacksnake, where he knew they would be crossed and taken to the summer range by way of Paradise Plateau. He ignored these and turned to ride deliberately along the edge of the Bottoms.

There were still numerous little bands of Indian cattle on the Bottoms,

each animal wearing on its ribs, in addition to the brand of its owner, a brand which outdid even Tom Mercer's. U S I D was the legend, standing for U. S. Indian Department. There were those who insisted that the interpretation placed upon it by many of the agents made the letters stand for "You Steal I Divide."

Sam's clamouring stomach warned him that he must soon commence to look for food, and he deliberately placed himself where he could expect to find no friends. If he could find some Indian camp he wouldn't hesitate to ask for food, but there wasn't a wickiup on the horizon.

He was circling along the base of the highlands which came down in alternating crooked hog-backs and deep, twisting canyons. The altitude was much lower than on the other side of the divide, and consequently there was only an occasional patch of snow to be seen until the summits of the range began to rise, sheer and abrupt; in marked contrast to the long slopes on the other side.

It was idle for Sam to undertake to investigate each and every canyon. It would have taken many days. All he could hope for was to discover enough cow tracks entering some particular canyon to justify an investigation. At last, just after noon, he found such a place. A herd of cattle, undoubtedly as large as the Mercer herd, had been trailed in there during the past few days.

The cowboy's heart began to pound against his shirt. His hunger and his throbbing wounded shoulder were forgotten. That the herd would be guarded was to be assumed. It necessitated moving with extreme care. For a long time he followed the tortuous canyon as it wound ever upward. Soon snow began to appear on the sides of the canyon, and up ahead lay a solid field of white.

Sam began to feel puzzled. He knew there would be no feed for such a large herd ahead of him. Nor could he see how they could be trailed over the summit, under which lay a monster drift with a comb fully a hundred feet high its entire length.

Then, suddenly, the trail ended. To all appearances two thousand head of cattle had there been taken up into the air. For a few minutes the puncher was lost, and then he realised what had happened.

The side of the canyon on his right was bare, though it was still soft and muddy at this time of day. When the cattle had reached that point there had still been a few inches of snow, enough to keep tracks from showing in the ground. The herd had been driven over the next ridge here, and the snow had gone off immediately. The melting snow had washed away all signs.

Without hesitation Sam rode to the ridge top and looked down into another deep canyon. The snow was gone down there, and it was two hours before he again picked up a trail. To his astonishment the cattle had been

driven down this canyon for a mile. They could just as well have been driven to that point from below and several miles saved. It indicated clearly that a deliberate effort had been made to lay a tricky trail.

The sun was getting perilously low, and the puncher faced the possibility of another bleak night camp. Anxiously he followed the dim tracks of the herd to the top of another high, rocky ridge, and then he looked down upon a sight which brought a gasp of amazement to his lips. He forgot the hardships he had been enduring.

Before him lay a tiny valley almost completely encircled by a ring of snow. The floor of it was carpeted with an old and young growth of bunch grass, and the cattle he had been trailing were grazing there in perfect content.

It took but a moment for Sam to unlimber the glasses which had proved invaluable so many times since Bee Mercer had lent them to him. Some of the cattle were so close that he could make out the big T O M on their sides, and more important still he could see the tiny curlycues, already scabbed over, which had been added to the M.

Next he looked for a camp, and he discovered a thin spiral of smoke issuing from a grove of aspens not en eighth of a mile below him. At once he was attacked with a pang of hunger. He resolved that he was going to get something to eat at that camp in a short time. If he couldn't get it one way he would another. Whether he fought for it or pilfered it would depend upon circumstances. Meanwhile, he took another look around.

There was no opening at all at the lower end of the valley. A small lake formed by the melting snow water could be seen in the lowest place, between three knolls. Toward the upper end of the valley, on the side opposite him, Sam made out a trail through the snow that twisted among the trees to a ridge higher than the one he was on. Evidently it had been much used, for though the snow seemed a foot or so deep the single trail wove through it like a black thread. Cattle wouldn't travel such a trail, so the only conclusion was that the outlaws used it to travel to and from Buckskin basin, which Sam knew could be only a few miles beyond.

That the Indians had been frightened away from this section of the reservation was certain; the chance that any white man might find it was remote — at least any white man the Rocking M had cause to fear. Yet Sam had found it. His problem was to use his information in the right way.

To go back the way he had come was unthinkable. He could, however, return to the Bottoms and then go to Call's Fork. It would be a matter of fifty or sixty miles the way he would have to go, and then it would be another twenty on to Portage City. Every step of the way would be fraught with danger, and he couldn't tell whom to trust with his information when he got there.

The remaining possibility was to cross the little valley, go over the trail he had seen to Buckskin basin, thence over the main divide and on to the Mercer ranch. This of itself would be a hard trip, and both he and his horses needed rest before attempting it. Also, there was the extreme danger of being captured or ambushed by his foes.

It was much nearer back to his starting place by way of Buckskin basin than the way he had come. That meant that he might expect many of the Rocking M outfit to be in that basin. One man he did expect to find there was Fernando Velez. He didn't believe for a minute now that the Mexican foreman had ever lost sight of the cattle. This alone was enough to cause him to choose the more dangerous course.

It was now nearly dusk. Sam waited until the Thunder horse came up to him, then he tied both horses out of sight and moved stealthily down toward the place where he had seen the smoke.

The outlaws had made their camp in a small grove of aspens, high enough up in a flat cove for the ground to be dry. It was no trick at all for Sam to reach the very edge of the grove undetected. A fire burned cheerily, and three men were hunkered around it eating supper. The savoury odour of the food made Sam's mouth water. His stomach set up an impatient clamour.

A huge kettle sat on the coals, indicating that the men were obliged to melt snow for camp purposes. Three saddles lay upon the ground, and the same number of blanket rolls were piled close beside them. The careful noting of these details assured Sam that there was nobody else at the camp. So far as the cattle were concerned not even one rider was necessary so long as there was grass in the valley.

Then, moving as cautiously as any Indian, Sam moved forward, step by step, until less than two rods separated him from the three hunkered men.

Two of the three he perceived at once were half-breeds. Their grinning faces in the firelight reminded him of pictures he had seen of devils in hell. All they needed was a pitchfork and a spike tail.

The third man had his back to Sam, but he knew that it was a white man, and he knew, too, that it wasn't Fernando Velez. Then the man spoke and Sam recognised the voice. It was Purd Holt.

"Purty soft job you two have here," he stated. "Nothin' tuh do but lay here an' sleep while these cattle grow fat."

"An' you fellers can't kick on yore jobs as long as Sproule lets yore boss run this reservation," one of the breeds replied.

Holt laughed. "We've shore put the fear o' Gawd into the Injuns," he declared.

"Yeah," the same breed remarked. "I don't mind sayin' I feel easier though now that old Ketchpaw is outa the way. Had he lived there'd been a showdown between him an' Turk one o' these days."

"Ah, hell, with the backin' o' the Rockin' M, Donald could clean out the whole damn reservation," Holt said.

The men threw their dirty dishes into a pan, and one of the breeds prepared to wash them.

"God help the man who killed Ketchpaw, though, if the Injuns ever find out who it was," one of the breeds said. "It's the mystery about it that chills 'em. Now they never know who the next one of 'em tuh hunt the happy huntin' grounds will be. But let 'em know who's been doin' the killin' an' that fellow wants tuh be quittin' the earth."

"I guess that's right," Holt agreed, "but the men who've been bumpin' 'em off ain't ridin' alone no more. Yuh can freeze tuh that."

A sense of real grief was in Sam Crane's heart when he heard that the fine old Indian policeman, Ketchpaw, had been killed. Also, he felt a bit of responsibility for it. He had given Ketchpaw some information which probably had led up to his being killed, though the policeman had always been a menace to the outlaws. It was but one more incentive for Sam to carry on his one-man war.

The dishes were soon washed, after a fashion, and at Purd Holt's suggestion a blanket was spread upon the ground by the fire and a poker game started. Sam knew the game might last most of the night, and he was finding it chilly in his stationary position. He waited, however, until the game got well under way and the players interested.

"Betcha two dolla," one of the breeds mumbled.

"I raise yuh," Purd Holt growled.

"And I raise the bunch of you," came a voice from the shadows. "Lift yore mitts!"

For an instant the men remained frozen.

"Aw hell," Purd Holt remarked then, "it's just one o' the boys."

"Don't act on it till yore sure, hombre," Sam warned. "The first man who moves will get shot."

Like a flash Holt's foot shot out and kicked one of the half-breeds away from the blanket, and the fellow continue to roll. Holt himself remained in a sitting position, but his hand dropped to the handle of his gun.

The half-breed had to be stopped. A minute more and he would disappear in the darkness. Sam fired at the rolling form of the fellow; then turned to meet the others. As he expected Holt whirled and fired, and the other breed made a flying leap for the nearest tree.

Sam sheltered himself as best he could behind a small aspen tree. He heard a limb of it crack as Holt fired, and then the outlaw sprawled over on the blanket as Sam's bullet impacted in his body. A third shot from Sam's gun brought the second breed down with a wounded leg, and the one he had fired at first lay cursing with pain. He had been hit in the hip.

A minute later Sam had the weapons of all three. The two half-breeds cursed their white companion for not having surrendered, but Holt was in too much agony to care. The man had been shot in the stomach.

"Do something for me," he wailed. "Do anything to stop this pain. Shoot me if yuh can't do nothin' else. I'll tell yuh anything yuh want tuh know if you will."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Mysterious Cabin

MANY times during the next hour Sam wished that the affair could have been settled in daylight. Then he wouldn't have missed. There was nothing he could do for the wounded men to stop their groans and curses. Holt, he knew, might live for hours, unless — he felt sure that the outlaw wouldn't live half an hour after his departure. The breeds would kill him if they could to stifle his cries.

To prevent this kind of murder he tied the half-breeds' hands and threw their blankets over them. He tried to make Holt comfortable, but without success.

"Damn Pete Dargo an' his rotten money," the man moaned. "It never was worth this."

"Tell me, Holt: Where is Dargo?" Sam queried.

"Last I see of him he was on his way tuh buy out old Tom Mercer," Holt groaned.

"An' what made him think Mercer would sell now?"

"Because he'll have got a letter — from Fernando Velez. The Mormon Kid — Oh, God, I can't talk any more," the man screamed. "Velez — in a cabin — over in Buckskin ——"

Every coherent word seemed to have cost the outlaw a paroxysm of pain, and thereafter Sam could get nothing from him. What he had said wasn't clear, but Sam guessed that Velez must have written Mercer that the cattle had disappeared and that he had as well sell. He also gathered that the Mexican was living in Buckskin basin.

As soon as he could he went back on the ridge and got his two tired, faithful horses. He sensed now that the need for haste had passed. If Mercer had been inveigled into selling to Dargo nothing could be done about it except to try to prove what the Rocking M men really were. He dared to hope, however, that Ray Bingham had been able to get an option on the Mercer outfit in his name. In that case the cattle being held in the isolated valley really belonged to him.

That Dargo and his tools, Velez and the Mormon Kid, would be surprised to find a supposedly strange cowboy bidding against them was a foregone conclusion. But his money, he realised, would do little except perhaps save the Mercers from poverty unless he could back it with his gun.

There was no way to avoid having to spend a night where he was. He turned his horses loose, cooked himself some supper, and did the best he could with the wounds. Having one of his own it was little enough.

Though he had resolved to keep awake his fatigue overcame him. The fire burned low, and gray dawn was creeping over the hills when he awoke, cold, and somewhat stiff. He sat up, startled. The two breeds were where he had left them, and their black eyes glared at him with a hatred equal to a rattlesnake's. Purd Holt's body lay stiff and still.

In short order Sam had prepared breakfast for himself and the two prisoners. Convinced that they were unable to do him any harm he liberated the men and brought firewood for them to feed their fire after he had gone. Neither man was able to walk. Their weapons he wrecked, Holt's gun he took along.

By sunrise he was again in the saddle, heading for the domain of his enemies. As he passed through the cattle, riding Gunboat, with Thunder still following along behind with the diligence of a young colt, Sam took notice of the brands.

Every animal wore a combination of the T O M and Rocking M brands. The ear marks on the animals had also been doctored, or rather mutilated. In two months the Rocking M people would be able to make their claim stick that the entire herd had been stolen from them. The curlycues had, of course, been put on with the most extreme lightness, on the theory that the Mercer outfit wanted them to be overlooked. But they were there.

A puzzling feature of the thing, however, was why Dargo should be trying to buy Mercer out now instead of waiting until he could blackmail the Portage cowman by threat of prosecution for the cattle stealing. Sam could do not more than speculate upon that.

When the rider emerged from the deceiving valley he saw before him a rough, hilly country almost devoid of snow. He hadn't gone far before he encountered several little bunches of cattle — Rocking M stock. Here was a palpable outrage, for this was range which the Indians themselves would later need for their small herds. It was proof of the power which Dargo had over the agent, but it also made evident why the Rocking M was so determined to get possession of the legal rights to graze on the reservation which Tom Mercer and his associates had so long held.

Presently he reached a point where the depression in the mountains known as Buckskin basin lay before him. Here the hills were black with Rocking M cattle, and a big horse cavvy being driven into some half-

breed's ranch informed him that here was the main camp of his enemies. Straight over the divide it wasn't more than ten miles to What Creek Pass. Now he could understand how the outlaws could maintain such easy control over the whole range.

Sam rode on until he reached a small pinnacle overlooking most of the basin. He left his horses out of sight in an arroyo at the bottom and with his six-gun and binoculars walked to the top. Buckskin basin he had been told was the habitat of Turk Donald and his unsavoury crew. Such full bloods as had head rights there had moved away.

For half an hour of more Sam watched the varied activity at the corral where the Rocking M cavvy was being held. Apparently the men had little to do for there was considerable bronco busting going on, seemingly for amusement. Sam studied the men carefully. Many of them he had seen, but the ones he was looking for hadn't appeared yet.

Finally the door of the log ranch house opened, and Sam exhaled a quivering breath. The men he was looking for were coming out. First came the lumbering form of huge Pete Dargo. Behind Dargo strutted the Mormon Kid, and Sam could see the white bandages still on the killer's hands. Behind the Kid came his two satellites, Neeves and Hooten.

Bringing up the rear was Turk Donald. The door closed. Velez was not there.

Holt had said that the Mexican was in Buckskin basin, and Sam couldn't comprehend why the man wasn't with the others. His hope that Velez might yet appear was doomed when he saw the five men who had come out of the house mount their horses and ride away.

The five headed back toward the hidden valley. The remainder of the crew split into two parties, a gang riding each way among the cattle. It was the first group only which interested Sam at that moment. To his surprise they soon took a new course, which would bring them extremely close to the pinnacle he occupied. He could see no reason whatever for their coming that way. The lack of an obvious reason, he figured, indicated an important one, for the men weren't riding for their health.

Remaining where he was Sam watched the five men ride slowly into a deep, brushy draw. As soon as they were out of sight he ran down to his horses and flung himself into the saddle. The men had been riding slowly, and by taking a parallel draw he knew that he could cut into the one they were travelling lower down.

His future course wasn't at all clear in his own mind. To challenge such a bunch lone-handed, particularly while he had only one good arm, would be foolhardy. And, despite the provocation, he couldn't bring himself to take a few shots at them from ambush, though he felt certain of his ability to get two or three of them and then make a getaway. Indeed, the only plan

he had in mind was to conceal himself near the trail, and if possible contrive to overhear what they had to say.

He had made a run of nearly a mile before he ventured to cut into the same draw the Rocking M leaders were taking. When nearly to the top of the ridge he looked back and saw Bob's Thunder horse, taken by surprise at the sudden gallop, half a mile behind. There was no time to wait for the horse to come up, and neither could he risk letting the brown come barging over the ridge to betray him. He swung down and tied Gunboat to a bush; then he hurried over the ridge on foot.

He had no difficulty getting down to the bottom of the draw, or rather small canyon, because the slopes were covered with dense thickets of small trees. Where he struck the draw nobody had ridden down it for days. Always keeping out of sight he began to work his way back up the canyon, and it wasn't until he was a considerable distance from his horses that he realised that his men must have stopped or turned back, else they would have been along.

For a moment he was undecided; then he hurried on to take a look around a bend of the canyon just ahead. If he didn't see anything of them there he would turn back.

Five minutes later he beheld a small open space, and just beyond it was a log cabin with five saddled horses standing in front of it.

Involuntarily Sam's hand shot down to the handle of his gun. Here were the men, with the exception of Velez and Sproule, who were the authors of all the outrages that had been perpetrated. It was a sore temptation to announce himself and shoot it out with them then and there despite the odds. If Bob Law and Ray Bingham had been with him —

The men were coming out of the cabin, and the Mormon Kid was in one of his wicked moods. His voice rose in a screech, though his words were indistinguishable. The pantomime, however, could be readily understood. The Kid wanted to go back in the cabin to murder somebody, and he was being restrained by Pete Dargo.

A half-breed and his greasy squaw had come out behind the men, but they plainly weren't the objects of the Kid's wrath.

Soon the Mormon Kid was prevailed upon to mount his horse and the five rode back the way they had come. Sam Crane watched them with indecision. If he was going to follow them he would have to hurry in order to get back to his horses before they got out of the canyon again. But he was also intrigued by what the cabin held. There was somebody there whom the murderous-minded Kid wanted to kill, and any enemy to the Kid, Sam thought, was a friend to him.

His decision was quickly made. He would make an attempt to rescue whoever it was in danger in that cabin.

He couldn't, however, just walk across the open space and walk into the cabin. The half-breed, undoubtedly one of Donald's crew, would shoot him at sight. He was pondering his method of approach when the breed walked out to a tiny corral, mounted a horse that was there, bareback, and loped away down the canyon. He passed within fifty feet of Sam. The squaw had retired into the cabin.

Swiftly Sam circled to where the brush came nearest to the cabin, and then made a dash for the door. He shoved open the door and went in. The squaw straightened with a grunt, and at sight of a stranger she grabbed for a butcher knife on the greasy table.

With a bound Sam crossed the room and his hand clamped like iron over the squaw's wrist. With a sudden deft twist he sat her down heavily in the middle of the floor and kicked the knife under a dingy cupboard.

There was nobody else in the room, but back of the cabin was a sort of dugout with an open door leading to it.

"Hello, is there anybody in there?" he called.

"Indeed yes," replied a voice, "and a little help would be appreciated."

Sam knew the voice. It was that of Fernando Velez!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

An Armed Truce

Sam's first reaction was surprise, followed instantly by fear of a trap. So deeply imbedded in his mind was his belief that the Mexican foreman was an outlaw, the murderer of his own brother, and the betrayer of Tom and Bee Mercer, that he couldn't comprehend that the man could be a prisoner.

Then, suddenly, the meaning of Purd Holt's disjointed sentences about Velez being in the basin became clear to him. No matter what else Velez might be, he was surely being imprisoned by the Rocking M gang — and the Mormon Kid had wanted to kill him.

Still keeping a wary eye on the squaw, Sam stepped to the entrance of the dugout. "Are you alone in there, Velez?" he asked.

"Quite alone — except for an occasional wood rat," Velez replied. "I'm also trussed up like a monkey in a sack, and I'm no Houdini."

"You've just had callers," Sam said. "They were friends of yours — why didn't they turn you loose?"

"You are still thinking, my good Sam, that I'm trying to help loot my employer?"

"I did think so, though it don't look like it now," Sam admitted. "There's

a lot of things I don't savvy, but you did turn over the big end of the cattle an' let 'em be branded so that the Mercers would lose 'em all an' mebbe go to jail besides."

"It was that or allow Miss Bee to remain as I am now — or worse," Velez said quietly.

Sam was stunned. He couldn't believe the man was lying, and if true it meant that Fernando Velez had qualities of manhood no matter what else he might be.

"Velez, I'm goin' tuh turn you loose," Sam stated. "But I'm tellin' you that I've been huntin' you to kill you — an' when this cattle business is straightened up I intend to do it if I can. But when the time comes I'll give you an even break."

"You astonish me, my friend, but I suppose you have your sufficient reason," Velez said quietly. "Meantime, I'd like a chance to keep this reservation range from falling into the hands of Pete Dargo if it's still possible. You said something about changed brands. Do you know anything about it?"

"I'll tell you what I know," Sam said, "as soon as you tell me what you know about the whole rotten business."

With an ominous warning to the squaw not to move from her position on the floor Sam entered the dugout and proceeded to cut the thongs which kept the Mexican helplessly bound. Every few seconds he went to the door to make sure the squaw was staying put. Meantime Velez talked quietly.

"They had us in a helpless position with Miss Bee a prisoner. To make sure that I didn't doublecross them about the cattle they refused to liberate her unless I voluntarily took her place."

"You knew that when you — fired me?" Sam queried.

"Certainly. It would have done no good to tell you then. And I realised, too, my friend, that you would soon be eliminated if you continued to work for Mercer. That was why I discharged you. I knew you could do more and be safer if you were foot-loose. It seems that I was right. Where is your pardner?"

"They got him," Sam said tersely.

"Somehow — they must be checked," Velez said softly.

"How long was they figgerin' on holdin' you here?"

"There was a difference of opinion," Velez said sardonically. "The Mormon Kid was minded to terminate my imprisonment abruptly. Peter Dargo, however, believed that I might yet be useful."

"Purd Holt told me last night that you had written a letter to Mercer advisin' him tuh sell tuh Dargo."

"I felt compelled to do so. They told me that you and your friend Bob, and Ray Bingham, had all been killed. They also told me of misbranding the cattle — Dargo is expert at that — and I realised that eventually my

friends would get nothing, and might, as you remarked, be subject to trial or imprisonment if they offered further resistance."

"On the other hand the agent, Sproule, is scared within an inch of his life and had been pestering Dargo to establish a legal right on the reservation somehow. Taking advantage of this fact I compelled Dargo to agree to pay Tom Mercer a fair price. Dargo really didn't mind because the amount would be paid by his Eastern employers, ostensibly for the ranch and range right. Dargo and his crew would get the cattle. So I felt that I was advising them for the best. Unfortunately, they refused to sell."

"They did?" Sam asked eagerly.

"So it seems. When they visited me yesterday they were really alarmed. They demanded another letter from me then which I refused to write. They gave me till ten o'clock to-day. When I still refused Dargo extended the time somewhat — against the protest of the Mormon Kid."

Velez was free now, and his thin lips were twisted into a peculiar, sardonic smile.

"An' what was the letter?" Sam asked.

"They wanted me to urge Tom Mercer to sell out to save my life," Velez said scornfully. "I could only laugh in their faces."

Again Sam Crane had to pay the Mexican high, though unwilling respect.

"Anyway," he said, "they'll be surprised when they find you vamoosed. I know where those cattle are bein' held, an' the worked over brands are still fresh enough tuh land Dargo and his whole gang behind the bars. Is this your saddle?"

"Yes. They allowed me to ride my own rig — to the end of the trail."

More than ever Sam was thankful that Gunboat and Thunder were as inseparable as he and Bob had been.

"Come on," he said, and picking up the Mexican's saddle he led the way back to where he had left the horses.

Sam could no longer doubt Velez's loyalty to his employer, and so he had no choice but to give the foreman full opportunity to try to save Mercer from ruin. At the same time there was the knowledge that up until a few days before Velez had been on extremely intimate terms with the Rocking M bunch. Finally, there was the question of the murder of Marve Crane to be disposed of. He resolved, however, to let that matter lie in abeyance until the issue with the Rocking M was settled. Then, if they both survived, they would have a show-down.

"I would have been completely fooled about the cattle," Velez admitted. "I felt sure they would be stolen, but I thought they would be driven somewhere to the other side of the desert — a straight out and out steal. The most appalling phase of the whole situation is the brutal murder of these Indians.

"I agree with you," Sam said. "Ketchpaw, I guess, was the last. Poor old devil — he found out about those cattle."

"Those murders must be avenged, my friend — providing you and me get out of Buckskin basin alive," Velez said evenly. "I don't suppose you have an extra revolver?"

"It just happens that I have," Sam replied. "I brought Purd Holt's gun with me."

"And you will loan it — to a man you have threatened to kill?" Velez asked with a smile.

Sam didn't smile back.

"I will. I told you when the time come I'd give you an even break."

"Thanks for the compliment — your faith that I won't try to take advantage of your generosity," Velez smiled.

They had now reached the place where Sam had left Gunboat, but to the puncher's surprise Thunder wasn't in sight.

"Now that's funny," he remarked. "Bob's horse wouldn't have gone far from my gray. You stay here, Velez, while I have a look around."

He swung into the saddle and cantered back toward where he had seen Thunder last. He had ridden about five hundred yards when Thunder abruptly raced into his view. The old brown was reaching out for more land, while just behind, and a little to one side, raced the half-breed who had left the cabin on his bareback horse.

Sam swiftly comprehended the situation. Thunder had wandered out on the ridge top in sight of the half-breed, who probably was in search of his own horses. Instantly the fellow had tried to drive the brown into the corral, but he had, fortunately, missed Gunboat. Moreover, old Thunder had proven to be rather too canny for the half-breed to drive, and he was well on his way to a getaway.

Horse and half-breed were still several hundred yards from Sam, and the breed saw Sam as soon as Sam saw him. The fellow brought his horse to a sliding stop, whirled the other way, and in less than a minute disappeared in the brush.

Sam gave a perfunctory chase, but quickly gave it over. There wouldn't be one chance in a hundred of sighting the fellow again in such brushy country. Instead he gave chase to Thunder, and after some little trouble, because the brown was so excited, he managed to catch him. By the time he got back to where he had left Velez the breed had been gone twenty minutes.

"It's an unfortunate break for us, my friend," Velez said sombrely. "Long before we can get out of this basin the Rocking M riders will be warned."

"We're in for it," Sam acknowledged. "Which way do you think we'd better go?"

"We have but one possible way to go," Velez said quietly. "That is over the divide toward the Portage. Our foes will be between us and every other exit."

"An' likewise there'll be plenty of 'em ahead of us that way," Sam remarked.

"True. The first ones we'll overtake will doubtless be the party who interviewed me a short time ago. But I told you once, Sam Crane, that it might happen that you and me would find ourselves pitted against considerable opposition. It looks like that time had come, and I believe we'll give a fairly good account of ourselves."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Brave Men Battle

RIDING side by side with the man he had sworn to kill gave Sam a strange feeling of unreality. He wanted to ask Velez about that year when he had been away from the Portage range, but he knew that if he ever broached the subject and the Mexican couldn't clear himself then the conversation must end with the roar of guns.

And, having seen the Mexican's skill, the best that Sam could hope for, barring an unforeseen bit of luck in his favour, was a draw — with both of them getting killed.

If the Mexican was worried by Sam's warning he betrayed no sign of it. Though he had been able to walk only with the greatest difficulty because of his recent imprisonment he sat on Bob's horse with a lithe, languid grace. He said little, but his eyes were constantly alert, and his knowledge of the country proved to be of great help in getting them to the end of the trail over the divide undetected.

Sam was honest enough to admit that if they were destined to clash with the five main outlaws that there was no man he had ever known, not even Bob Law, whom he would rather have beside him than this gentlemanly, educated Mexican.

"I was disappointed that Tom didn't accept the Rocking M offer when it was made," Velez spoke up once. "It would have permitted him to get the surgical treatment he needs, and it would surely have made Bee's path much easier."

"I think I know," Sam said. "Tom Mercer is a fighter. His pride couldn't stand bein' forced tuh sell, if they were offerin' him twice what his stuff was worth."

"You've hit it," Velez said. After a pause he went on. "I wish it were possible for somebody to buy him out — somebody who would continue to give both the Indians and the small cow outfits a square deal."

Was that a leading question? Sam wondered. If Velez was the man Sam thought he was he would likely have known all along that Sam was no ordinary cowboy. The Crane ranch in New Mexico had been well known. He didn't believe that Velez could have found out about his offer to the Mercers through Ray Bingham.

Sam was also wondering if Bingham had obtained an option on the property, and if this were the reason Dargo had failed to make a deal. He refrained from discussing the matter with Velez.

There was a single way to get from Buckskin basin to the table lands above Tom Mercer's spring range opposite What Creek, and that followed a steep and more or less twisty canyon. By this time cattle could be trailed over without difficulty, but no Rocking M animals had been taken over yet. For nearly two miles the road followed this canyon with each side guarded by monster drifts with high, overhanging combs. If the two men were pocketed here they would have no chance whatever.

They were almost to the top when Velez looked back and coolly announced that they were being followed. Nearly a dozen men from the basin were heading into the pass, and there was no way for them to conceal themselves.

"Well, the bloodhounds are on the trail," Sam said grimly. "I wish my other bread-hook was in workin' order — I'd greet 'em with a rifle ball when they got a little closer."

"Better let me have the rifle," Velez suggested. "I'm not as good with a rifle as I am with a revolver, but I probably can shoot better with two hands than you can with one."

Without a word Sam pulled the rifle from the scabbard and handed it over. Their foes were coming onward at a run, despite that fact that it was a horse-killing pace up the divide. The two fugitives, despite the imminent danger, continued on at a walk until they reached the top and gazed out upon the rolling range which was the bone of contention between the Rocking M and the small cattlemen.

From where they were down to the Portage was a gradual descent. Beyond that lay the snow-covered Aspen hills with What Creek Pass cleaving them in one place like a knife gash. Lower down on the river were the string of ranches belonging to the cattlemen Pete Dargo had been trying to ruin, and the nearest one was that of Tom Mercer.

Sam found his mind going down to that ranch, wondering if Bee Mercer was there, wondering what her emotions were, wondering if she still believed that he had murdered Loren Allstead.

His wondering was cut short by a sharp exclamation from Fernando Velez. Following the line of the Mexican's pointing finger Sam caught sight of a group of horsemen waiting behind a lone grove of aspens not a quarter of a mile away. It needed no binoculars to identify these men as the ones who had left the half-breed's cabin just before Sam's arrival there.

"Four of them," Velez remarked softly. "Dargo had gone on. It is too bad."

Darting a swift glance at his companion Sam was amazed to see that the Mexican's face was entirely transformed. It seemed darker, and there was a curious blaze in the fine black eyes. His lips were drawn slightly back from the teeth in a grin in which resided no mirth. It was the look of a killer.

Limned as they were on the top of the divide there was no chance whatever for the two men to avoid being seen. The posse from behind was fast overtaking them, and any other way they turned the four men below would see them.

"Well, it looks like we'd just as well ride down an' meet yore friends," Sam said evenly.

"At close range we would have a very good chance," Velez said. "At long range very little."

"Anyway, we can't stay here," Sam said.

"True." The Mexican's eyes were searching the surrounding country carefully, and presently a gleam of satisfaction came into them.

"We have just one chance, my friend," he said. "You notice the two men just coming out of an arroyo yonder?"

"Indians," Sam said.

"And those men are waiting for them to come along. Our arrival may be timely — for those Indians."

Sam mentally agreed. The Indians were following a road which ran beside the grove, where the four killers were out of sight — of them. There could be little doubt that they were waiting to catch the Indians by surprise, for some reason or other.

"We can warn the Indians, but I doubt it doin' us much good when these other hombres come over the hill," Sam said.

"Yet our only chance is to let the Indians know and appeal to them for help," Velez said. "Failing that you will have to go on to the ranch and do the best you can."

"Meanin' which?" Sam shot out.

"You see that small cluster of rocks there to our left? We must head for there. The grove will be within rifle range. I'll stop there with the rifle and see what I can do. If I can hold them in the grove you will have a good chance to get past them. If they pursue you we will have them out in the open, and between us," Velez explained.

"The strategy is all right, but there's one thing wrong with it," Sam said. "Whether I git through or not you won't stand a Chinaman's chance if you stop in them rocks. While we're in this together I'm not savin' my skin at the price of your life."

"There's little love between us, Sam Crane," Velez said coldly. "You yourself have said that when it is all over we shall be at each other's throats. Now you must agree with me that the only thing worthy of consideration is for one of us to escape and prove the criminal actions of the Rocking M outfit."

"Right," Sam said curtly.

They had been riding at a trot toward the rocks Velez had indicated, and now they put their mounts to a gallop.

They knew they had already been seen by the men by the grove, and they couldn't doubt that they had been recognised. Their foes were holding a swift conference. Then two of them spurred away from the grove to a point considerably beyond the place Sam and Velez were heading for, but their object plainly was to head them off. At the same time the other two dismounted hurriedly, jerked their rifles out of the holsters and began pumping lead at the two fugitives.

The first shots were too high, and when the men lowered their sights the distance had been increased, and their bullets landed too low. Nip Neeves and Turk Donald were the riflemen. The Mormon Kid and Monk Hooten had ridden away. Both of the latter two worthies had recently been wounded, and Sam conjectured that they would be little better with a rifle than he was. Nor did he believe they would be as formidable at close range as they would have been before he had shot the Mormon Kid's guns out of his hands.

"You hold those two there, an' I'll rassle with the other two," Sam said eagerly.

"Be sure," Velez said in a curiously strained voice, "that you get the Mormon Kid if he gets in your way. Don't bother to give him an even break."

They gained their objective and Velez flung himself behind a rock. Sam started on; then remembering that Thunder would follow him he paused long enough to tie the brown horse in the safest spot he could see. He couldn't leave Velez afoot.

While he was thus engaged the Mexican had sent the two snipers deeper into the grove.

Swinging back into the saddle Sam noticed that the two Indians the outlaws had been laying for had turned back the other way and were laying the leather lustily to their ponies. No help could be expected from that quarter.

"Well, Velez, if I git through I'll be back," Sam shouted.

"Whether it's a threat or a promise," the Mexican laughed, and dropped his rifle for the moment in order to light a cigarette.

A cool customer, this Velez, Sam acknowledged.

No sooner had Sam left the rocks than a rifle bullet struck the dirt twenty feet from his horse's nose. A moment later Velez's rifle was booming again, and the men in the grove had no opportunity to take careful aim at Sam. With Gunboat taking a long, racking lope there was small chance that they could have hit him anyway.

But if Velez had also left the rocks the men would have sprung to their horses and paralleled his course until both foes were pocketed. And that was exactly what happened before Sam had gone more than three hundred yards. The other party had reached the divide, and seeing them coming Neeves and Donald hastily abandoned the grove and raced on to help the other two intercept Sam. A minute later Velez was also in the saddle. Riding like a madman the Mexican headed his mount straight toward a point midway of the four main foes.

The other party thundered down in pursuit.

Sam instantly perceived the desperate tactics which Fernando Velez was pursuing. The Mexican was cutting across for a point where he could be certain to cut off Neeves and Donald, but in so doing he would forfeit his own chance to follow Sam in his break for liberty. The posse from behind, dividing into three parties, would head Velez off in one direction or the other. The only chance the Mexican had was to remove Neeves and Donald from his path, and then fight a running battle with the others.

Sam was quickly compelled to attend to his own outlaws and leave Velez to his. He did, however, pay a mental tribute to the courage of the perplexing Mexican.

There was a dip in the terrain just ahead into which the Mormon Kid and Hooten had disappeared. At any moment Sam expected to meet a fusillade of bullets from their guns, and his plan to meet it was with a burst of speed from his horse which he hoped would carry him within revolver range of the killers before he was checked by a bullet. At any rate the battle wouldn't be long drawn out.

At the lip of the dip he gave Gunboat the spurs for the first time, but when he dropped into the hollow only one of his foes was there. That foe was Monk Hooten. Two hundred yards to his right he saw the Mormon Kid racing to intercept Velez.

The instant Sam appeared in sight Monk Hooten went into action. Hot lead from the gun held in his left hand whined and whistled over the cowboy's head. The outlaw's other gun was held ready for use in his other hand, but that member was still too sore to be of use. The combatants were

on a parity, each with a crippled arm.

Four shots rattled from the outlaw's gun as fast as he could pull the trigger, and each one just skimmed the air above Sam's head. Sam sensed that had he been moving on a level some of the shots would have went home, but as it was Gunboat was dropping below the bullets with his unbelievably long strides.

Then they were on a level, and Sam raised his gun for the first time. At the same time he used his trick of swinging far sideways as he fired, throwing his weight all in the left stirrup. Hooten's fifth shot fanned his cheek. Then, utterly demoralised, the outlaw plunged home the spurs and tried to flee. Before his horse could respond a bullet struck Hooten in the side of the head. There was a thump as the outlaw's body struck the ground, and his terrified mount pounded on through the sage.

The way was open for Sam to escape. There was no outlaw in front of him, and he was sure there wasn't a horse belonging to the Rocking M that wouldn't have to take dirt from Gunboat's heels when he let the gray out.

Sam had meant to get away no matter what happened to Velez. With a dozen strides after Hooten was out of the way Gunboat was on the other side of the dip, and the rider looked back. He saw Fernando Velez riding full tilt between Nip Neeves and Turk Donald. Six-guns barked viciously. The detestable half-breed plunged from the saddle, and dropped in a crumpled heap against a bush. Nip Neeves dropped both guns and with head drooping low clung desperately to the saddle horn. Fernando Velez, Sam saw reel in the saddle, but the Mexican reined his horse sharply and raced for the dip — straight toward the spot where the unspeakable Mormon Kid had stopped in the shelter of a giant sarvis bush.

Instantly Sam comprehended that if the wounded Mexican continued his course the Mormon Kid would murder him without his having a chance. On the other hand if Sam turned back to interfere the other outlaws would be upon him. But without an instant's delay Sam whirled Gunboat around and charged straight toward the Mormon Kid.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Marve Crane Is Avenged

THAT the Mormon Kid had yielded to his murderous wish to finish the job which Pete Dargo had stopped him from doing earlier in the day, even at the risk of letting Sam Crane get by Hooten, was apparent.

Knowing how bitterly the Kid hated him Sam could form some idea of

the malignant hatred the killer had for Fernando Velez, when he deliberately passed up a chance to stop Sam for the privilege of murdering a man who seemed doomed anyway. And so intent was the killer upon watching for the appearance of Velez that he failed to notice Sam's whirlwind charge until the puncher was within a hundred feet of him.

Almost at the same instant that he turned his head sharply to see Sam, Fernando Velez appeared over the edge of the dip no more than half that distance away. Because of the brush Velez failed to see the Kid.

A hundred feet is long range with a six-gun, particularly from the back of a running horse; but there was no time for delay. Sam raised in his stirrups and started to pour lead.

For just an instant the Mormon Kid hesitated. He held a gun in each sore hand, but though Sam's bullets had destroyed the Kid's prowess as a quick draw artist it hadn't interfered with his ability to shoot straight. And straight shooting was all that counted now.

Deliberately the Kid ignored Sam and opened fire with both guns upon Fernando Velez.

Though Sam was pulling trigger with desperate haste he seemed unable to check that flow of bullets from the Kid's guns. He saw Velez reel in the saddle. The Mexican was smiling curiously, but he made no effort to return the Kid's fire.

There had been five shots in Sam's gun after he had got Hooten, and as he shook out the last one the Mormon Kid threw up both hands and hurtled to the ground. Sam knew that no less than three of his bullets had entered the murderer's body. The Mormon Kid's career was finished.

Gunboat cleared the body of the Mormon Kid with a prodigious leap, and then was running side by side with Thunder.

"Thanks — you saved me a dirty job, my friend," Velez said weakly.

Sam could see two spots of blood on the Mexican's shirt, and one arm was dangling helplessly by his side.

"Can you ride?" Sam asked.

"Perhaps — for a while."

"It won't have tuh be far," Sam said grimly.

One bunch of the pursuers had now gained a place where they could intercept the fugitives if they tried to head toward What Creek. The only way open was straight across the rolling terrain, and within a mile they would again strike a ridge with an overhanging comb of snow at the top which would check their flight. Either way they turned then they would be headed.

There was no alternative but to keep on going with the slender chance that they might find something to use as a barricade against the outlaws. Both horses ran gallantly, and though a flock of bullets swarmed after them

neither horses nor men were hit. With certain victory in sight, and plenty of evidence of the fighting quality of the two men they were chasing, the outlaws were content to keep out of range until their victims were pocketed with no means of escape.

Within half a mile Velez was staying in the saddle only by a miracle of balance and stamina. Only a superb horseman could have stuck at all. Riding close alongside Sam reached out and caught the man's uninjured arm and helped to steady him.

"My friend, why did you want to kill me?" Velez asked weakly.

Sam was so thunderstruck that the matter had totally slipped his mind.

"Velez, I think you killed my brother," he said. "He was shot in the back, but before he died he wrote your name in the dust."

"Funny the things a man will do for a brother," Velez said presently. "I, too, had a brother. You — just — killed mine."

"What?" Sam shouted.

A bitter sardonic smile twisted the Mexican's face. "The Mormon Kid, he was an illegitimate son of my father. His mother was English. It was always my wish to deal fairly with him. All the money from my father's estate I spent to keep him out of trouble. We came north to the Mormon country where he wasn't known, but his escapades there became too much. To escape them I came to this country. For years I remained here, working for Tom Mercer. Then my brother wrote to me — asking that I come home." Here Velez paused to cough, and his lips were stained with blood.

"He was working on a ranch with Neeves and Hooten. They asked me about the range up here. At that time there was plenty. I met Dargo. He seemed all right. He assured me he could get many cattle to run if he could find range, and he promised to do well by my brother. I was responsible for the Rocking M coming here. I returned to work for Tom Mercer, and then I found out what Dargo and his gang really were."

"I guess you was in a tough spot," Sam admitted.

"Perhaps tougher than you realized," Velez said weakly. "While I was down there negotiating with Dargo, my half-brother, with Neeves and Hooten, were committing a despicable series of crimes in another section, and wherever possible they left evidence indicating that I was the leader of the bandits.

"Your brother, my friend, didn't live to scrawl my name in the dust. It was the Mormon Kid did that."

"In the name of God, why?" Sam cried.

"So that if I refused to become Dargo's tool up here they would threaten to charge me with those crimes," Velez said quietly. "For several years I stalled them off the best I could, but the show-down had to come at last. You had your share in that, Sam Crane."

"Velez," Sam said presently, "you're an honest-to-God man. It's been a pleasure to know you. If we get out of this ——"

"I will not get out of it, my friend," Velez smiled. "But if you do I have but one request to make. Do not tell Bee Mercer anything of my past. I — I — cared for her — very much."

"I'll tell her just this, Fernando," Sam said. "I'll tell her that you placed yourself in your enemies' power to rescue her, and that you gave your life defending her interests."

"That will be kind," Velez acknowledged.

"And I'll tell you something, Fernando," Sam went on doggedly. "I once asked Bee if you'd ever asked her tuh marry you. She said no; but she said that if you ever did she might accept you."

The Mexican's tanned face lighted, and he smiled tenderly.

"It could not have been — but what you say makes me very, very happy."

Then, suddenly they were at the end of their trail. A steep hill lay in front of them, crowned with the monster drift which couldn't be climbed. Either way they turned the Rocking M outlaws would flank them.

"There's a flock of boulders down there," Sam said calmly. "As long as our ammunition lasts I don't believe they'll have the guts to come an' git us."

"And you may get away when it becomes dark," Velez said.

They dashed up to where a mass of boulders had rolled and crashed down from a sharp, abutting cliff at a prong of the ridge. Sam leaped from the saddle and caught Velez in his arms. In a moment he stripped the saddles from both horses to get the blankets from under them to make the foreman comfortable in the shelter of the rocks.

Then, taking the rifle which Velez had never lost, Sam knelt to keep the outlaws at bay as long as he could.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Trappers Are Trapped

For an hour and a half Sam exchanged shots with the outlaws. He was better protected than they were, and so they kept at long range. Occasional bullets spattered among the rocks where he lay, but did no damage.

He soon noticed that another party of Rocking M men and half-breeds had arrived from Buckskin basin, and he judged that his besiegers numbered more than twenty in all.

Occasionally Fernando Velez murmured an encouraging word, but the valiant Mexican was rapidly growing weaker. Finally several of the outlaws attempted a rush that would get them to a sheltered place at much closer range. For several minutes Sam conducted a lively duel with them, and despite his difficulty with a rifle he wounded two, and sent the others retreating in a hurry. When he looked around Fernando Velez was dead.

A sense of loneliness suddenly assailed Sam. Bob was gone, and now Velez. Well, he thought, his time would soon come.

The next moment his ears were tingling to the sound of the wildest, weirdest yells he had ever heard. From out of an arroyo behind the outlaws poured a stream of yelling, shooting horsemen.

At first glance Sam supposed them all to be Indians, but a little later he saw that fully a third of them were whites. Among the whites he could plainly make out the gigantic form of Ray Bingham. Then, suddenly, Sam rubbed his eyes with his fists and looked again. The blood in his veins was tingling with excited pleasure. It seemed impossible, and for a moment he had thought it an optical illusion of some kind. But the man riding neck and neck with Ray Bingham was none other than Bob Law!

The outlaws had been thrown into instant panic. They had tried to reach their horses, but they were more hopelessly surrounded than Sam had been. At the first volley from the others the men elevated their hands. Even so several of them crumpled before the enraged Indians could be restrained. Then Sam came out of his shelter and Bob Law fell upon him like a tickled pet bear.

"Had a hunch it was you playin' tag with this riff-raff," Bob said. "Who was with yuh?"

"Velez," Sam said soberly. "They got him. But, man, what a scrapper he turned out to be."

"Lotta things I reckon I don't savvy," Bob said. "We figgered he was in with 'em, even though Miss Mercer said she knowed he wasn't."

"But I thought you was drowned," Sam said.

"Yuh can't drown a guy who was born tuh be hung," Bob laughed. "I kinda figgered I was fish food at that, but I got flung on to a little island in the middle of the river before I plumb passed out. The next mornin' I swum across tuh the side opposite the butte, an' then I hadda walk clear back tuh the bridge."

"Did yuh ride from there?"

"Shore. I waited till a Rockin' M puncher come along an' I let him walk from there," Bob grinned. "I made my way tuh the ranch, an' found Bingham there ahead of me with that piece of cowhide with the disfigured brand. Then Miss Bee an' Bingham got busy, an' finally collected a posse that was willin' tuh make a stab at huntin' that herd o' cattle. We'd just got as far

as the place where them Injuns had moved to when two bucks come a-flyin' in with word that hell was poppin' up here."

The others were now coming up, and then Sam learned that Pete Dargo, on his way to make another effort to force Tom Mercer to sell, had been taken prisoner. He had no more than heard this news when he was amazed to see Bee Mercer herself riding up with Charley Bishop on one side of her, and little Ida Ketchpaw on the other.

As gently as he could Sam told her about Velez. The girl walked over to where the dead man lay, and gazed down into his face.

"Anyway, he did his share toward clearing this country of outlaws," Bee murmured. "I wish that he could have recovered the cattle they stole — it would have made him happy."

"Why, he did," Sam said generously. "He found out that they're bein' held in a little valley the other side of Buckskin basin. An' there's evidence enough there tuh convict the whole crooked gang, includin' the rest of Turk Donald's breeds, and that graftin' Indian Agent besides."

"What's that?" Bingham shouted. "Yuh say them cows have been found?"

"I know where they are," Sam said.

"An' Dargo said they never could be found," Bingham said. "He said we'd be the ones goin' over the road. Lemme at him."

The big cowman climbed into the saddle and galloped away.

"One thing I can't savvy," Sam remarked. "How did yuh git these Indians to fight?"

"It was through this little girl," Bee said. "The Indians were afraid of the agent. They didn't dare attempt reprisals until they had proof that it was the Rocking M men who were shooting their men in the back or dragging them to death with a rope. They — they dragged Ketchpaw to death as they did Loren Allstead, and they left the rope around his neck too.

"When the Indians took the rope off they found several feet had been cut off the end. It was a rope with a peculiar green thread running through it. Then little Ida here produced four feet of rope of exactly the same kind which she declared she cut off the end of a rope owned by Nip Neeves."

"I remember the circumstance," Sam grinned.

"And those two Indians were on their way to lay their case before their friends at Call's Fork when they were turned back a few hours ago," Bee said. Then she added: "My Indian girl is quitting me and Ida is going to take her place."

"Then — then you intend to keep on — running your outfit," Sam asked.

"Sam, that was a terribly idiotic thing you tried to do when you wanted to buy our outfit, knowing that it wasn't worth anything, but I do appreciate the spirit of it," Bee said soberly.

Somewhat to Sam's surprise he discovered that everybody else had withdrawn.

"You didn't turn Dargo's offer down then to let me buy it?" he said.

"We wouldn't sell to you unless we had something to sell and we wouldn't surrender to Dargo on any terms. That is," she said hastily, remembering Velez, "on any cash terms."

"I suppose then," Sam said regretfully, "that me an' Bob will soon be ridin' on."

Looking into Bee Mercer's face he suddenly realised that he didn't want to ride on. He knew now that her loyalty to Fernando Velez hadn't been love.

"We will give you an option on the ranch now if you like," Bee said quietly.

"You really want to sell?"

"We don't want to, but it seems best. With some ready cash father can have his operation. But I don't know what he'll do with himself out of the cattle business if he does get well."

"Miss Bee," Sam said impulsively, "I don't want to buy you folks out. I want to buy a partnership, half an' half. I wouldn't be much good myself, but Bob Law would make a dandy foreman."

"Why," she asked softly, "would you rather have a partnership than to be the sole owner?"

"For just one reason. I want to keep you around until I can have a chance to make you fall in love with me," he told her anxiously.

A flush swept over Bee's face to the hair roots, but she met his eyes steadily.

"I think I've already done that," she whispered.

THE END

"I'm gonna find a Mexican named Velez, if it takes every cent and every ounce of strength I've got. And, when I do, it's gonna be him or me," vowed Sam Crane.

Years before, Sam's brother, Marve, was shot in the back. He lived just long enough to scrawl a name in the sand — "V-E-L-E-Z." From then on, Sam Crane and his sidekick, Bob Law, scoured the Southwest to track the killer.

By the time they'd located a Mexican foreman named Velez, they were too involved and only ninety percent sure they'd found their man. Involved with old Tom Mercer, who had a bullet in his spine . . . involved with Bee, a girl who was not likely to lose her head . . . involved with the incipient Mormon Kid, with the Rocking M gang, with slick Pete Dargo and with the brutal murder of innocent Indians.

In range-bred, tough-fibered Sam Crane, Frank C. Robertson gives the reader a real western in a series of spine-tingling situations.

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